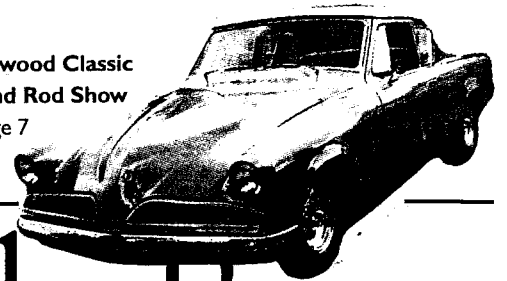


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Free Every Other Thursday

Fun Work For Free Wheels

By **ROB HAMPTON**

Gripping a crescent wrench in her tiny fists, Maddie Denman, 9, cranks on a mountain bike's rear hub while her partner, Van Teng, 13, holds the cycle steady. They're in the overflow room—the cramped kitchen in back of the Bike Works' repair shop—sharing floor space with a refrigerator and dozens of dilapidated bikes. Nine kids have shown up to repair bikes today, so work space is at a premium.

Maddie doesn't look ready for grease. She's wearing rainbow-striped socks, sandals, and a clean shirt with a panda bear on the front. But she narrates her progress with the confidence of a Detroit diesel mechanic. "I think it's reverse-threaded," she tells Van, and then hauls on the wrench in the opposite direction.

Maddie and Van know what "reverse-threaded" means, the difference between caliper and cantilever brakes, and how to adjust a derailleur, because they're participating in the Earn-a-Bike program offered by the Columbia City nonprofit bike shop called Bike Works. Budding mechanics attend eight afternoon lessons on bike repair, each teaching a different skill. Once they've learned the basics, they can earn a bike by completing 24 hours of service repairing donated bikes. For many kids, the bike they earn will be the first bike they own.

Bike Works was founded in 1996 with a mission to provide affordable bicycle services for Rainier Valley's youth. "One reason why we located in this area is that it has the highest population of kids in the city, as well as the lowest-income families," says program director Suzanne Paulson. In addition to offering the Earn-a-Bike program, Bike Works runs a discount

village in Ghana.

Today, the repair shop is quickly becoming as crowded as a toolbox. Eli Leidig, 15, struts through the door prepared to work. Dressed in blue nylon warm-ups, he announces, "I'm ready!" in a cracking, mid-pubescent voice. David Wiktorski, the Earn-A-Bike coordinator, has a bike ready for Eli—a BMX doomed to take a beating in the "ghost riding" competition at the upcoming Bike Works-sponsored Summer Cycle Challenge. "Is it all junked up?" Eli asks with a bit of trepidation. With a loose headset and wobbly seat clamp, it's unridable, but Eli's got the skills to get it rolling again.

As Eli arms himself with wrenches, the room fills with middle- and high-school kids. Soon, they're tuning bikes elevated on repair racks, or sorting through milk crates labeled "Kickstands" or "Derailleurs" or "French Stuff," while four employees and volunteers offer tips and bolt-loosening brawn. If there's one inherent disadvantage to being a young bike mechanic, it's lack of muscle: When kids ask for help, it's often not for information, but for help with a stubborn nut.

Sitting near Eli, Ellis Byant, 12, makes bird noises as he salvages spokes from a bent rim. Ellis has reason to sing—he's already earned four bikes through the Earn-a-Bike program. Though a free bike lock came with each one, Ellis still keeps his booty indoors. "If I kept them outside, they'd probably get jacked."

Nick Diaz, on the other hand, is getting his first bike ready for the road. Nick is small for his 14 years, and hip and leg problems make walking difficult, but soon he'll be riding



Rob Hampton photo

Soi Tang polishes grimy hub bearings.

swap for a real bike. Much to my surprise, he got on a bike, and started pedaling like crazy."

The white BMX Nick selected is a donated chopper: With long, slightly curved forks, it's a class of bike coveted by young urban riders. Recently, Bike Works began challenging Earn-A-Bike veterans to make their own choppers. Paulson says, "We find that the more experienced kids keep coming in—we have one kid who's going on his fifth bike—and we realized that these kids want to be here, but they don't need more and more bikes. We get about 1000 bikes donated every year, and so we have lots of stuff. So we started to make some of those into specialty bikes and then teach the kids more advanced skills—some welding, swapping parts, doing a little bit of engineering, sticking bike parts in weird places where they're not supposed to be."

Whether they're building a recurrent bike frame out of scrap, or just

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Rob Hampton photo

Eli Leidig (right) tightens a loose seat clamp while Ryan Montero, a Bike Works volunteer, holds things steady.

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lubing a chain, all Earn-A-Bike kids learn valuable work habits. "They learn that they have to work to earn something, and they have to complete a job that we hold them accountable to: 'What did you do today? Did you actually finish? Did you clean up your tools? Did you work the whole time you were here?' And they keep that on a time card."

But it doesn't take much cajoling to keep the Earn-A-Bike kids on task. Many are motivated to earn their first BMX, or customize their dream bike. Others come to simply hone their skills and enjoy the company of other bikers. One thing they all have in common is pride in their work.

The pride is apparent as the kids finish the day's labors. Quyen Tang, 12, has been quiet and serious all afternoon, adjusting a mountain bike's clattering derailleur, or gear-changing mechanism. As

cranking the bike's pedals and clicking through the gears. The chain slips with quiet precision from one cog to the next like water running over stones. Quyen looks up, and seeing someone watching breaks into a grin. "See that?" he says.

To learn more about Bike Works Earn-a-Bike, log on to www.scn.org/bikeworks or call (206) 725-9400.

State Support

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crocs include everything from app to shellfish to wine, and Washington is the third largest specialty crop producing state in the nation.

Working together since November, leaders of Washington many crop commissions, along with grocery retailers and farmers' markets, have been working with