

SPOKES PEOPLE

Welcome to Seattle, a.k.a. Bike City.

BY MARY CATHERINE O'CONNOR



Suzanne Carlson (upside down) and Chris Heitmann: bike evangelists

WHERE'S THE HUMANITY? A little girl's mother is taking away her daughter's only tool of independence in this savage, potholed world. And she is doing so on the cusp of summer—the time of growth and discovery and the ice cream man. Lost on the girl is the fact that her mother is snatching her bicycle in order to swap it in for a bigger one, one with hand brakes even. This new vehicle will be the key to the girl's ever-increasing freedom, which will inevitably lead to unchaperoned excursions further afield than her neighborhood block.

Earlier this spring, Columbia City's Free Ride Zone, Seattle's one and only community bike shop, held its third annual and most successful Kids' Bike Swap at the Genesee Playfield. Spawned by parents searching for creative ways to keep their sprouting kids on bikes that fit, the bike swap ensures a safe, sturdy bike to kids willing to turn in their present means of transport. Volunteer mechanics put the bartered bikes through a battery of tests and adjustments while the growing ones search the aisles of refurbished, more grown-up cycles. Most leave happy, others keep turning around, straining for a last glimpse of the bike that brought them this far.

Back in the Free Ride Zone shop—where

donated, souped-up bikes are up for sale, as well as new and used parts—I spot an aged black Sears Cruiser, just like my dad's old model, which at 12 years of age I insisted on riding even though it was far too big. Perhaps if my parents could have swapped in my blue-and-white banana-seat job for a more appropriate bike, I never would have crashed down on that Cruiser's crossbar and spent all these years wondering if I'd ever bear children.

Three years ago some concerned citizens, including current City Council member Richard Conlin, established the Free Ride Zone. Funded mostly through grant money, FRZ offers Rainier Valley's youth a number of ways to become savvy with bikes and interested in riding. With the Earn-a-Bike program, 9- to 17-year-olds can learn bicycle mechanics in after-school or summer classes for \$20. Once they've employed their newfound skills for a total of 24 hours, they're given the FRZ bike of their choice. Lessons in safe riding are incorporated into neighborhood rides and rodeos held throughout the year at nearby schools and parks. The Free Ride Zone shop—a lime-green house at 3709 S Ferdinand Street—is Rainier Valley's only bike shop, and its

