

BEST

BICYCLE REPAIR/ PHILOSOPHY SHOP



Anyone can win the Tour de France. (OK, maybe only Lance.) But how many Seattle-area cyclists are willing to support and otherwise volunteer their experience and hours in the saddle at Columbia City's **BIKE WORKS**? Founded in 1996, the neighborhood nonprofit is the only one of its kind in Seattle. With a sales and repair shop up front, Bike Works channels its profits—which support about half the operation, the rest of its funding coming from grants—into the educational and outreach efforts in back. This is where the rubber meets the road in the act-locally-think-globally spirit of community service. Programs include Earn a Bike, in which kids ages 9 to 17 take hands-on classes in bicycle maintenance and mechanics to swap labor for a new/used set of wheels; or their efforts go toward the Bikes to Ghana program that has sent some 4,500 bicycles to a country where they're sorely needed as a basic means of transportation and economic sustenance. (Other local charities also benefit.)

For Executive Director David Strong, the mission is to "keep recycling bikes" into the community (and abroad). But there's a strong element of cycling evangelism, too. He notes that childhood obesity is rising at an alarming rate among minority groups; encouraging kids to pick up wrenches, then start spinning the pedals, is a lot healthier than an afternoon on the couch with PS2 and a bag of chips. Children's and adult repair classes, all of them reasonably priced, are often taught by former students. They're so popular, Strong notes, there's often a waiting list—of course, more volunteer teachers would help. On a recent weekend visit, I watched as a half-dozen kids cheerfully mastered the intricacies of removing cranks and pedals (turn in the opposite direction to loosen!) and the mystery of the "dog-bone wrench." A staffer and his teenage volunteer assistant had the kind of DIY, learning-by-doing attitude that would gladden any parent's heart; the kids happily got their hands dirty and even more happily took a Popsicle break.

Strong wants Bike Works to help convert urban residents to the "fun and practical" benefits of cycling for both transportation and exercise. There's also a sporting component, as five of his young riders just completed the Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic. On the walls, next to the inner tubes and gear bins you'd find in any bike shop, there are Polaroids of volunteers and staff, plus the results of time trials conducted at nearby Genesee Playground. Earn a Bike classes are popular enough to draw students from North Seattle, but Strong wants to see Bike Works draw especially from, and contribute to, South End families, where earning a bike to commute to a job really makes a difference.

To help the shop's supply of nicely refurbished preowned rides, Strong wants to see more road bikes donated (but not those old steel-rim Schwinn Varsity clunkers, please), as STP types are graduating to carbon fiber frames. Just as important, volunteers can help mentor young riders, teach classes, and lead youth rides. Because there's more than one way to be like Lance.

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