

Recycling Then Cycling: Youths Rebuild Old Bikes

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ITHACA, N.Y. — For many children here, the price of a brand-new bicycle is just too high. But in a makeshift workshop supported by the city and community groups, they can get their wheels by working.

Since 1990, an organization called Recycle Ithaca's Bicycles has collected unwanted bikes, matched them to prospective owners and, after teaching the young people some rudimentary cycle repair, watched with satisfaction as bicycles were overhauled and returned to the streets.

So far, 500 bicycles have passed through the program, which has the support of Mayor Benjamin Nichols, community organizers, Cornell University and the Green Party.

Tony Poole, director of the Southside Community Center, which joined the program at its inception, said that fixing bicycles was only part of the project's appeal.

Idea Gains Momentum

"The benefits are so clear," he said. "It gets bicycles to people who don't have them. It spreads the concept of community service. People work in exchange for receiving bikes. They become aware of volunteerism. It reduces theft of bicycles. This program has reached out to a whole host of people we'd never have reached, from all walks of life, and all colors."

The idea for bike recycling began with Gregory Rolle, an Ithaca native who has become active in community programs to help young people.

"There were a lot of kids, poor kids, who didn't have bicycles," Mr. Rolle said. "They would be riding double and triple, and stealing each other's bikes, and getting into a lot of arguments about who would have the bike. So I came up with the idea of having bikes donated."

Mr. Rolle took the idea to Paul Sayvetz, another community organizer and Green Party member, and before long, the idea became a program of Southside center, an agency that provides day care and after-school activities. With support from City Hall (which eventually helped find rent-free workshop space), the Green Party (which linked Mr. Rolle and the community center) and Cornell University, a workshop was set up in the spring and summer of 1990.

Volunteers spent months collecting and sorting through old bicycles, negotiating for storage and work space, and doing initial repair work before

the first batch of bicycles changed hands in the spring of 1991.

"I brought some bikes to the Community Center and it mushroomed from there," Mr. Sayvetz said. "Kids came running."

Transportation Option

The program outgrew its first home, and a second location was short-lived because of disputed zoning regulations. In December 1991, Ithaca's Board of Public Works provided the project with a building of its own, a building once used to dry sewage sludge.

Mayor Nichols, who is also chairman of the public works board, sees the program as part of a larger effort to expand transportation options in the city.

"We're looking on bicycles as a major means of transportation," Mr. Nichols said. "We want to develop more bicycle lanes, bicycle paths and bicycle racks in addition to public transportation. People are getting used to the idea that bicycles have a right to the road."

From the beginning, dedicated adults played a major part in the program's operations. James Watkins, 37, and Philip E. James II, 33, who is known as "Pappy," made a full-time occupation of volunteer bicycle maintenance for about a year. Both men had completed a rehabilitation program for alcoholism; neither had returned to full-time work.

"You don't have to know a lot about bicycles," Mr. Watkins said. "Everybody there just teaches. We don't do the repairs, we show them how to do it and they do it themselves. It's hands-on. That's what we want, anyway. Sometimes we have to help them along. But they still learn."

At Work on Repairs

On a recent Saturday afternoon, the repair shop was crowded. Andy Ruina, 40, a volunteer who is a professor of engineering at Cornell, circulated among small groups of apprentice bicycle mechanics, answering questions and giving practical help. Between consultations he greeted newcomers, helped them pick out bicycles, and got them started on the process of repairing them.

The clientele is a cross-section of the community. The Saturday crowd included adults, teen-agers and 10-year-olds with varying levels of bicycle-maintenance skill.

Two brothers were putting the finishing touches on the bicycle they rebuilt for themselves. Ebay Phillips, 12, and Richard Lewis, 10, came to Ithaca from Chicago earlier this summer. They were pleased with themselves. "This is my first time fixing up a bike for myself," Ebay said.

Keaton (pronounced KAY-ton) Johnson, 14, will be a 10th grader at Ithaca High School this fall. At work rebuilding his second bicycle, he catalogued what he had learned.

"I know how to oil, how to fix the chain without getting your hands all oily," he said. "You switch the gears, and the chain will come up on top of

Lottery Numbers

Aug. 8, 1993

New York Numbers — 173

New York Win 4 — 4523

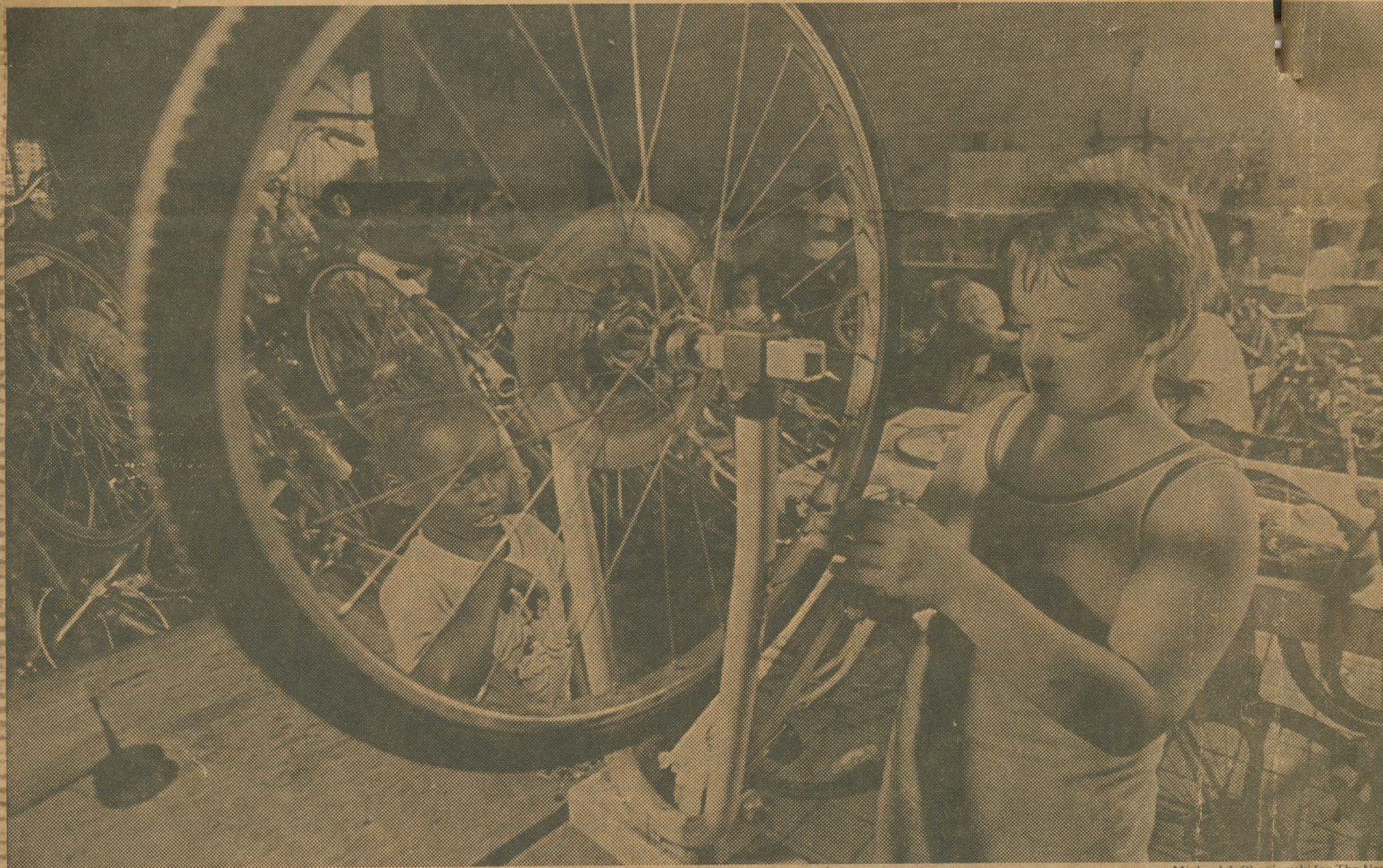
New Jersey Pick 3 — 742

New Jersey Pick 4 — 1991

Connecticut Daily — 943

Connecticut Play 4 — 3174

Aug. 7, 1993



Michael J. Okoniewski for The New

Since 1990, an organization called Recycle Ithaca's Bicycles has collected unwanted bikes, matched them to prospective owners and returned them to the streets after a little sprucing up. Brett Gill, 12, tightened the spokes on a donated wheel as Deborah Acio, 7, watched.