

URBAN BIKE PROJECT MAKES OLD BIKES NEW AGAIN

By Dan Metz / Special to Delaware Business Times / Jan 9 2019

The Urban Bike Project gave away 100 bicycles and helmets as part of their ambitious annual Christmas Build in 2018. The bikes were collected throughout the year and distributed to young children in need across Wilmington throughout the holiday season.

The bicycles aren't new. They are outgrown, discarded and sometimes broken hand-me-downs. Each winter, an army of volunteers descend on UBP's small Walnut Street shop to fix and polish piles of bikes before the December deadline. It's a diverse group of volunteers: Business execs, bike enthusiasts, and neighborhood kids each take turns building and repairing tiny bikes for 100 children ages eight or younger.

Among the volunteers was Larry Carson, owner of a consulting company and a member of UBP's board of directors. He volunteers because he believes in the positive effects of UBP and biking in general.

"Everybody [at UBP] loves to bike, and everybody thinks it's a healthier lifestyle," he said. "It's environmentally friendly, health friendly, and it's good for the community. What's not to like?"

Biking is a big part of Carson's life. When he's not working or volunteering, he's the president of the Delaware Biking Blue Hens, a group of local bike enthusiasts who participate in an annual biking trip across Iowa. He's glad to see people sharing his passion, calling the project and its volunteers a "bunch of like-minded bicyclists working together to do some good things."

UBP was founded around projects like the Christmas Build. It was created in 2006 by four friends — Sarah Green, David Hallberg, Brian Windle, and Dwayne Crosby — who shared a passion for salvaging and repairing old bikes. Their weekend hours spent fixing bikes drew the attention of neighborhood kids in the Trinity Vicinity neighborhood, who started coming to them with questions about their flat tires and derailed chains.

Their reputation grew, and Windle soon found his apartment full of bikes that needed repairing. UBP was created to help teach those children. The friends sold bikes and taught lessons out of Windle's apartment, using a painted bicycle to mark the home for customers.

The UBP has moved twice since then and has expanded into a busy programming hub with two full-time employees and a board of directors. Executive Director Laura Wilburn doubles as the youth program coordinator, and Shop Manager Sean McGonegal runs adult programming.

The Christmas Build started three years ago when Wilburn and McGonegal noticed a buildup of donated bikes for children who were too young to participate in their programs.

"We wanted to do something positive for the holidays, something feel-good and nice for the kids in the community," said Wilburn, who became executive director in 2013.

They decided that the best option was to give the bikes away for free. That attitude is central to UBP's mission: getting bicycles to people in the community who need them.

One-tenth of all working Wilmingtonians have no access to a car to get to work, and more than one-in-six walk or use public transportation. That can pose a significant challenge. "A lot of folks don't realize how challenging it is to get where you need to go if all you have is sometimes bus fare and your feet," said Wilburn.

UBP's Free Bike Program gives refurbished bikes to adults who can't afford other modes of transportation. Sometimes, those bikes make all the difference: Wilburn told the story of one participant who used a UBP free bike to go from unemployed to making \$30,000 a year. He can afford a car now, she said, but he still rides his bike because he appreciated the exercise.

UBP also does plenty of work with children, including the creation of week-long Build-a-Bike summer camps started in 2011. Children ages 11-17 spend their mornings learning to build their bikes out of a bike frame and a pile of parts.

In the afternoons they go on field trips and perform community service.

The community service is important, said Wilburn. It teaches that volunteerism is “something we can do to improve the community for everybody and support things in our communities that we like having.”

Grants and sponsorships cover two-thirds of their operating budget and volunteers help run everything from open shop nights to the Christmas Build. Corporations send employees to build bikes as a volunteer opportunity, and Project New Start, a re-entry program for the recently incarcerated, sends participants for community service and vocational training.

Urban Bike Project’s 2018 financial supporters include Longwood Foundation, Dogfish Head Brewery, Department of Health & Social Services, Neighborhood Building Block Fund, Capital One, Discover, White Clay Bicycle Club, Wilmapco, Independence Wealth Advisors, Exelon Foundation
