



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

SPOKES PEOPLE

BY MARY CATHERINE O'CONNOR

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

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 stock is made up wholly of donated bikes. Some of these gifts are real gems--like a rare Claud Butler road bike with a tripped-out custom tachometer.

"I really saw it as a way to take bikes that are sitting in basements and get more kids riding them," says program director Suzanne Carlson of FRZ's unique program. She has seen the bike swap take off in its first three years, peaking at this year's event with 88 Seattle kids rolling off on bikes, saved from another 10 years of basement stagnation.

As the Aforementioned young girl mourns the loss of her pink-seated Cascadia steed, 12-year-old Robert Mosley walks around the bike swap on a security beat. Robert, a graduate of the Earn-a-Bike program and owner of a refurbished 10-speed, replete with rack and side mirror, says he wants to be a member of the Seattle Police Department's bike patrol. Perhaps other graduates of the Earn-a-Bike program will pursue more secure biking careers, like, say, as bicycle couriers. Despite fears that electronic mail would wipe them out, there are enough documents that require real John Hancocks to keep messengers racing up and down city streets for the

foreseeable future. Bike messengers tend to be vocal advocates for cycling, but they're far from the only ones in Seattle. Home of the Cascade Bicycle Club--once the largest cycling club in the country--as well as the Bicycle Alliance of Washington, and an outpost for the many, the leaderless, the Critical Mass-ers, Seattle is serious bike-advocacy turf. One would not be wise to walk into the Storeroom, Linda's, Kincora's, or any other biker hangout on a crowded night and yell, "Bikes are for wusses in tights!"

Many of us whose day jobs rule out Lycra suits opt to wear them to and from work. In 1998, 5,000 people joined the Cascade Bicycle Club in "Ride to Work Day" (which just took place on May 21), and there has been a 100 percent increase in bike commuting since 1985, with nearly 2 percent of the city (or 20,000 people) riding to work at least once a week. And as far as the law is concerned, bicycles are vehicles just as Hondas, Fords, and tractor-trailers are vehicles--a distinction not bestowed upon cyclists in other cities. In Chicago, for example, bikers are "permitted but not intended users of roadways." And that won't help out a pedaler in traffic court.

In a bit of legal schizophrenia, Seattle cyclists are both vehicle and pedestrian, since riding a bike on a sidewalk is not illegal here. While in the pedestrian mode, bikes are supposed to be walked across crosswalks. Morally, riding across a street is right up there with jaywalking. But who wants to stop and get off the bike just to cross a street when danger lurks all around at all times? We risk life and limb to car doors, potholes, tire-sucking cracks, and the ubiquitous hater of bicycles behind the wheel of a cab or a bus or even a nice new Subaru because we know that our two wheels grant infinitely more freedom than four. For most of us, the Schwinn or Huffy we started off with revealed to us the value of self-propulsion (wind in our hair, bugs bouncing off our teeth). It's why 45-year-old lawyers buy Harleys and why kids build quarter-pipes and why thousands of people ride from Seattle to Portland every summer and pay for the privilege.

Hills schmills; that's why we have gears. This town is a bike haven, and we are poised on the brink of another freewheeling season. If there isn't a neighborhood ride near your house, start one. Or ride with the Free Ride Zone crew, or with the gaggle of mostly messengers who ride around Capitol Hill and downtown on Friday nights. Or just try a wheelie.

That two-wheelin' feelin':

Saturday and Sunday Rides--Cruise along Lake Washington Boulevard between Colman and Seward parks. The road's even closed to traffic--bikes only. A tradition for more than 30 years. 10-6. 6/12, 29; 7/10, 18; 8/15, 28; 9/11, 19.

Critical Mass--Meet on the plaza near Westlake Center every Friday night at 5:30.

Alley Cat Race--An unofficial, unsponsored, slightly covert, and hectic race through town. Fun! Meet at 19th and Thomas on Capitol Hill, 6/5 at 5pm.

Track Racing for Beginners--'Round and 'round they go, where they stop nobody knows. Learn the fundamentals of whizzing around a track. Class certifies you to start racing against other beginners at the Velodrome on Wednesday nights. At Marymoor Velodrome, Redmond. 206-675-1424. \$40. Next classes begin 6/21 and 6/24, 6:30-9:30pm.

Bicycle Alliance of Washington, Bicycle Washington '99--A weeklong, 392-mile, fully supported ride. 224-9252. 8/1-6.

Second Annual Bavarian Bike and Brews Bash Festival--IMBA-sanctioned mountain bike race, 8-mile novice, 15-mile sport, and 22-mile pro courses. Fifteen breweries. Leavenworth, 6/5. www.bbbbfestival.com or call Der Sportsman, 206-548-5623.

Volunteer at Free Ride Zone--Bike repair parties, first and third Sat of every month, 10-2, and every Sun, 10-4. Work on bikes, and they'll feed you. 3709 S Ferdinand. Or join one of their neighborhood rides, 725-9408.

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