

Phoenix Bikes Program Combines Community Service With Skill-Building

by KRISTEN ARMSTRONG, Staff Writer (Created: Saturday, April 26, 2008 8:10 AM EDT)

For many young people, riding bikes is a great way to exercise, spend time with friends and get from place to place without bugging mom or dad for a car ride.

But bicycles can be expensive - what are kids who can't afford one supposed to do?

Phoenix Bikes, a non-profit community bike shop with after-school programs for middle school and high school students, tries to help solve this problem by offering Arlington's teens the chance to earn their own bicycle.



Phoenix Bikes participants Tommy Palmer and Julio Gomez with the program's director, Colin Dixon, and shop instructor John Harpold. (Photo by Kristen Armstrong)

To earn a bike, “they have to check things off a list, including bike repair and safety skills, business skills and a shop project,” said Phoenix Bikes director Colin Dixon in a recent interview.

Originally a county-run program called Community Spokes, which was shut down about two years ago, Phoenix Bikes started in Barcroft Park in March 2007.

The county provides some grant money, but Phoenix Bikes is funded mostly by its bicycle sales and repair services, as well as through private donations.

While earning a bicycle is the clear draw for participants, the benefits of the program go beyond the free bike.

The participants “come to understand the value of riding bikes as alternative transportation,” Dixon said.

“They also learn to see their own ability to become leaders,” he said. “I've seen some kids come in not knowing they could be leaders in the other areas of their lives, but I see them get comfortable here and even start teaching their friends.”

“The Phoenix Bikes program lets kids learn positive behavior and leadership,” said Steve Temmermand, Arlington Parks and Natural Resources division chief and Phoenix Bikes supporter. “They get some really good kids, but they also get some kids who are at risk. They're attracting those that really need direction.”

It's much nicer to see the more at-risk youth go home on a bike rather than in a police car, he said.

And whether the participants' interests for the future are in bicycle repair, or if they'd rather be an astronaut or graphic designer, the Phoenix Bikes staff and volunteers are supportive and like to see students reach their dreams.

One participant, Tommy Palmer, has shown how the bike skills he's learned have helped him reach his goals.

Palmer has been involved with the bike program since he was in sixth grade (when it was still Community Spokes), and recently got a job as a bike mechanic at Spokes Etc. in Alexandria.

"I've learned how to do pretty much everything," he said. "I can put a whole bike together from just the parts."

Phoenix Bikes has gotten a strong response (about 70 participants have enrolled in the last year). And with the newly created Kennan Garvey Memorial Fund to help raise money for a larger, more permanent location, and a fund-raising bike show on Thursday, May 1, the program will continue to grow.

"I think Phoenix Bikes is an amazing combination," Dixon said. "It teaches a sustainable transportation infrastructure and develops young leaders. It's a special organization."

For more information on Phoenix Bikes and the upcoming bike show fund-raiser, see the Web site at www.phoenixbikes.org.