

Not Afraid of Elbow Grease

Local Bicycle Clinics Help Those Who Want To Fix It Themselves

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“I didn’t realize there was so much to bikes,” says Carla Carreira, 25, peering down at her Schwinn cruiser at the Bike House clinic in Northwest Washington’s Petworth neighborhood. She bought it on Craigslist a couple of months ago and hadn’t thought much about tires and tube valves until now. Carreira is one of the dozens of cyclists who brought their wheels to the clinic one Saturday in need of mechanical help. But no one dropped off their bikes and paid a pro to fix the problem. Instead, each Bike House “guest” — not “customer” — picked up tools and got to work. Volunteers supervised, talking them through each turn of the wrench. It didn’t look like an average day at your local bike shop.

That’s because it wasn’t. In the past several years, a few local enthusiasts have launched volunteer-run programs designed to teach people about bikes. Some, such as the Mount Rainier Bike Co-Op and Phoenix Bikes in Arlington, are bona fide city-supported youth programs; others, such as Bike House, get by on donations. But all are open to anyone who doesn’t mind getting their hands a little greasy. It’s cheap. It’s fun. It’s eco-friendly. And, hey, isn’t that why you started biking in the first place?

When the brakes and bottom bracket on her old Trek started acting up, District resident Mia Ballard, 24, knew she needed repairs, but the expense and atmosphere of a commercial shop didn’t appeal to her. She brought her steed to Mount Rainier Bike Co-Op on a Tuesday evening, where volunteer Aaron Benko walked her through removing crank arms and adjusting brake cables.

“It feels better here,” she said, aligning her front wheel. “The atmosphere is more chill.”

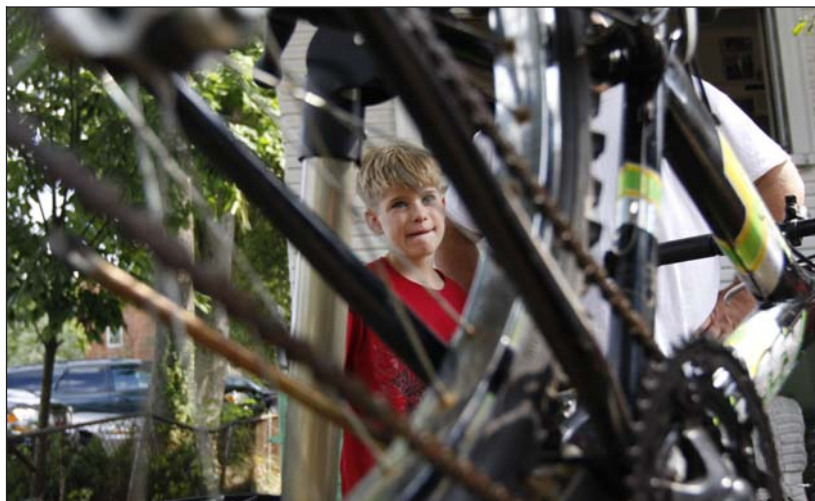
The homey environment that bike clinics provide is part of their appeal. In the case of the Mount Rainier Bike Co-Op, homeyness is a given: It’s operated out of a house on a quiet residential street. Bike House, run under a tent behind Qualia Coffee on Georgia Avenue NW, is even more unassuming. And on weekends at Phoenix Bikes, which occupies a small concrete shed in Barcroft Park in South Arlington, the atmosphere is downright familial; families frequently stop by in the middle of a Saturday bike ride or drop by to donate a bike a youngster has outgrown.

Both Phoenix Bikes and the Mount Rainier Bike Co-Op focus their efforts on kids. Phoenix, according to volunteer Christopher Jones, is technically a youth program that “happens to fix bikes.” Both organizations host open-shop nights for adults, but they also offer “Earn-a-Bike” programs in which young people work in the shop in exchange



Customers and volunteers work on their bikes at the Mount Rainier Bike Co-op, a volunteer-run program that teaches people about bike repair.

PHOTOS BY EVY MAGES FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



Brody Steck, 10, looks at his new bike, found in the bulk trash by a volunteer.

for their own bike. On Saturday afternoons, the shop is bustling with young people either working or preparing for a ride. In the midst of kid chaos, adult cyclists poke their heads into the shop to inquire about repairs.

Minor fixes at all three workshops are either free, donation-based or cheap. But they do not try to compete with stores such as City Bikes and Revolution Cycles. “We have a great relationship with [the local shops],” says Mount Rainier volunteer Dave Cahill. Stores refer their customers to Mount Rai-

nier when they want to buy or donate a used bike, and when Mount Rainier doesn’t have the right tool for a job, the co-ops return the favor. “We’re not a bike shop,” Cahill says. “We’re a co-op.” For major overhauls, it is still best to use a commercial shop, which can offer the regular hours, fully stocked workbench and cash flow that bike clinics cannot.

But as more Washingtonians drag their old Raleighs out of the basement, either to enjoy the weather or to take up a new way of commuting, bike clinics are meeting a



Cyclists at Mount Rainier admire a Brooks bike seat, imported from England.

If You Go

MOUNT RAINIER BIKE CO-OP

3601 Bunker Hill Rd., Mount Rainier.
301-277-2110. www.mrbikecoop.com.
Hours vary. Check Web site for updated calendar.

PHOENIX BIKES

4200 S. Four Mile Run Dr., Arlington.
703-575-7762. www.phoenixbikes.org.
Bike sales and repairs: Fridays from 3 to 7:30 p.m., Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
Bike donations and minor repairs:
Tuesday-Thursday from 3 to 6 p.m. Shop
night: Tuesdays from 6:30 to 10 p.m.

THE BIKE HOUSE

3917 Georgia Ave. NW (behind Qualia Coffee).
www.thebikehouse.org.
Clinics: Saturdays from noon to 3 p.m.

growing need.

“This has been sitting in the rain for two seasons,” admits Fairlington resident Jane Whitaker, referring to the rusty road bike she has brought in to Phoenix for a tuneup. “But I used to ride it a lot. . . I love this bike. I’d like to start riding it again . . . and learn [how to fix it] in an emergency.” She watches as Jones fiddles with her drivetrain, explaining each step as he goes.

Maybe next time she’ll do the fiddling herself.