

Exemplary Social Services Hosted by Sacred Places

Mentoring and Older Youth

Photographs (l, r) by Molly Lester



In Neighborhood Bike Works' Earn-a-Bike program, youth and teenagers learn bike skills, safety and maintenance. When they graduate from the 14-week program, participants earn the bikes that they have repaired.

NEIGHBORHOODBIKEWORKS

at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Hamilton Village

By Ann de Forest

Sean Betts, 15, has always been interested in how things work. He took his first bicycle apart when he was 9 years old. The results weren't pretty. "I didn't really know how to put it back together," he shakes his head, remembering now. Now Sean is a whiz at bike mechanics. Many weekdays after school, Sean can be found in the basement of the parish hall of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Hamilton Village, keeping his racing bike in peak condition. Neighborhood Bike Works, an innovative youth development program housed at St. Mary's, has given him a place – along with tools and guidance – to

hone his skills and cultivate his curiosity.

Since 1996, Neighborhood Bike Works (NBW) has introduced kids like Sean to a world of opportunities through bicycles. In after-school, weekend, and summer classes, youth ages 8-18 come from West Philadelphia and beyond to participate in NBW's Earn-a-Bike program, where they learn about bike safety and repair. After fixing up used bikes donated by the community, participants graduate with a bike of their own, a helmet, and a lock.

"It's trash to treasure," NBW's



The basement at St. Mary's has been transformed into a bike workshop

Executive Director Andy Dyson says of the program's simple philosophy. The kids involved get a sense of true accomplishment in transforming broken-down bikes

Photograph by Molly Lester



Photographs courtesy of Neighborhood Bike Works



Teens who demonstrate commitment and potential in Neighborhood Bike Works' Earn-a-Bike Program (left and right) are invited to join NBW's racing team (center).

into a fun and functional means for getting around town – their own personal treasure they get to take home and keep. “You get rewarded for learning,” says Dyson. “You’re learning that learning itself has its rewards.”

The “trash to treasure” philosophy could also describe NBW’s transformation of St. Mary’s parish hall basement into a colorful, lively workspace. The basement presents a scene of ordered clutter, with every surface a variation on the theme of bicycles. Tires, tubes, handlebars, and other bones of bicycle skeletons hang from the ceiling and walls. Bright murals painted in collaboration with the city’s Mural Arts Program feature Lance Armstrong and Major Taylor, an African-American cyclist who in the 1890s defied Jim Crow laws to compete, becoming a world-famous racing champion. Even the banisters are fashioned from bike gears and handlebars. NBW has colonized the church’s undercroft as well, as storage for the used bikes and parts sold under the auspices of the archly named Divine Bike Church, to earn money for NBW’s youth development programs.

St. Mary’s Rector Jim Littrell jokes about the multitudes of bicycles hidden underneath his sanctuary, “I think they party there and have progeny.” “With any other landlord,” Dyson jokes back, “we would have gotten thrown out a long time ago.” He appreciates the church’s willingness to put up with a bunch of noisy, sometimes unruly

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teenagers. “They don’t have to be taking these risks with their beautiful building. They’re helping us by having us here.”

For Littrell, NBW’s active outreach to the larger community resonates with St. Mary’s own mission. The association has become “symbiotic.” NBW is one of the faces St. Mary’s presents to the world – as well as its own congregation. “I

hope it leaves some people with a sense that a church is engaged with its own community and people beyond itself – not just passively but actively.”

Through a singular focus on bicycles, NBW has spawned programs that change young people’s lives – and by extension transform communities too. “It’s a unique organization,” says Glenn Devitt, Health Council Program Coordinator for the School District of Philadelphia, which has collaborated with NBW on several physical fitness and anti-obesity initiatives. “The service that they provide to the community is invaluable.” Participants in the Earn-a-Bike sessions, for example, take home much more than a cool bike they fixed up themselves. They gain confidence, work habits and practical skills that have a lasting impact. Building and repairing bicycles involves both collaboration and the ability to work independently. “It’s an avenue for young kids to learn and hone their leadership skills,” says Devitt. “They learn patience skills. They learn communications skills. These are skills you would use in the corporate world.”

NBW teaches “a way of thinking,” echoes Dyson, “If you can diagnose a problem and figure out a work plan to solve that problem, that’s most of our jobs. Whatever your future employment, you’re going to be doing that kind of thing.”

Sean Betts aims to work with computers one day. Since coming to NBW a year ago, Sean has emerged as a “silent leader” in the basement workroom, according to program director David Bevacqua, willing to share technical tips with younger kids, serving as a co-instructor for some classes, and above all, leading by his example as he tunes his bike with attentive patience.

Through NBW, the talented technician has even discovered talents he didn’t know he had. Invited to join NBW’s bike racing team – a select group of Earn-a-Bike graduates singled out for their maturity, determination, and focus – Sean has emerged as a racing star. “He’s fast,” says his teammate Saleem, also 15, “I’m fast too, but not as fast as him.” Sean wasn’t always so fast. Says Bevacqua, “He started in the rear of the pack...He was able to experience what it feels like to work

at it and have your work pay off. And now he’s in the front.”

Dyson attributes his organization’s success to NBW’s attitude towards the youth it serves. Rather than seeing the kids, many of them

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poor and marginalized, who come to NBW from all over the city “as a problem to be solved,” says Dyson, “young people are a resource for their community.” Earn-a-Bike, the racing team, recreational bike rides, and an array of programs formed with partners ranging from Spiral Q Puppet Theatre to the School District of Philadelphia provide means for kids to realize their own potential as community resources, to see themselves as leaders and problem solvers, and to have fun in the process. For kids like Sean, already focused and self-disciplined, NBW also provides a refuge from neighborhood distractions. Says Bevac-

qua, “The racing team has become a place for ... kids who don’t hang out on the basketball court. It’s a way to get out of the house. It’s an activity that’s safe and supervised.”

St. Mary’s Church, on the edge of the University of Pennsylvania campus, has proved an ideal location for that refuge. “The great thing about this being a church is that it’s neutral territory for kids to come to,” says Dyson. The campus, too, is “not anybody’s turf. It’s safe. It’s near public transport.” Littrell sees NBW as an important bridge between West Philadelphia and Penn, giving neighborhood kids “a chance to see Penn, how it works, and to meet people there on an equal footing.”

While NBW keeps growing, with a satellite workshop in West Philadelphia’s Haddington section and another just opened on Temple University’s campus in North Philadelphia, Dyson doesn’t envision the association with St. Mary’s ending any time soon. “As long as there are kids who don’t have anything to do after school, and as long as bicycling is a good, healthy way of getting around the city,” he says, “there’s reason for us to be here.” ♦

Photographs by Molly Lester



Left: A young Neighborhood Bike Works participant shows off his bike, which he will earn after volunteering for at least 20 hours repairing bikes.

Right: The basement at St. Mary’s hosts NBW’s abundance of bike parts, tools and programs.





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