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Program teaches youngsters about bicycle safety, repair

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Pictured is the first graduating class of the Earn A Bike program at the Chevy Chase Community Center in White Township. Front row, from left: Holly Wetzel, 18; Daniel Schrack, 17; Brian Rusch, 17; and Matt Reininger of Indiana Schwinn Cycling And Fitness. Back row: coordinator Lisa Kuzneski; volunteer Lori Hubert; and coordinator Justin Query.

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Everyone remembers the big moments of their lives: their first date, their first job, getting their first set of wheels.

The Chevy Chase Community Center is providing a lot of happy days for youngsters in Indiana County through a new program that has at least one of its main organizers coming away just as happy as the kids involved.

They're getting their first bikes — for free — but also gaining some appreciation for their new tickets to liberty because they actually have to work for them.

Appropriately called the Earn A Bike Program, project leader Lisa Kuzneski said she modeled it after similar programs in place in other communities.

The principles are the same: The Chevy Chase center, as the host site for the program, collects donations of new and used bikes and helmets for their riders. A corps of volunteers conducts eight hours of training, teaching children the rules of the road, important safety principals and the most common kinds of repairs to keep their bicycles in service.

Each class runs two hours, starting with lessons, videos and demonstrations followed by hands-on or on-the-road practice of what they've been taught.

"A lot of community people have donated bikes, so has the Indiana Borough police department," Kuzneski said. "IUP police dropped off some bikes to them and they reached out to me."

The program trainers include folks from Citizens' Ambulance Service to talk about first aid. Local bike shop owner Matt Reininger teaches the maintenance lesson.

On the night the new bikers wrap up training, organizers send them rolling away on their new wheels. And it's hard to tell who's happier.

"I learned a lot about bike repair myself," Kuzneski said. "They had to pull brakes from another bike, tires from another, and put them on their own bikes. So it was interesting. They really got involved. And I had no idea what to expect."

The inaugural Earn A Bike Program recently finished up for a small class of about four kids, and Kuzneski said the next session starts Monday. After a week off, their next classroom and lab sessions are set for three more Mondays, Oct. 14, 21 and 28, from 6 to 8 p.m. for each class.

Registration is being taken for future sessions, which Kuzneski readily assured because of a stockpile of donated bicycles available both to be cannibalized for repairs or adopted by a loving young owner.

In addition to the donated bike, Kuzneski said she thinks the program can thrive, too, on the contagiousness of appreciation.

“We’re hoping that some of the kids that learn bike repair can come back and help teach other kids. I hope it builds and grows. Actually, two of our kids were interested in helping with future programs and I thought it was great that they got something out of it and want to help others.”

There are no special qualifications for kids to join the program. No household income limits. No residential requirements. A program brochure says it’s for kids ages 10 and older, but Kuzneski said an eager, younger child might not be turned away.

Kuzneski said she lobbied “for years” to raise community interest in starting an Earn A Bike Program, and even got her friend Barbara Croce excited about the idea, even before Croce was hired as the executive director of Chevy Chase Community Center.

With Croce’s encouragement, the center’s board embraced the idea.

“When I first saw these programs going on ... I saw kids and adults just building relationships, working on their bikes, and learning all these skills. Sometimes they don’t realize it but they’re also creating good connections and positive relationships.

“I’ve worked in human services for a long time ... and that’s where I’m coming from: Let’s get kids a hobby, be safe, build relationships. That’s what it was. It is about bikes, but it is about all those good positive bonuses.”

Those interested in the Earn A Bike Program — as donors, as volunteers or as participants — may contact Kuzneski at (724) 762-7117 or email indianabikeseearnabike@gmail.com to learn more.

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