

# TribTown: Bike Club gives wheel-ready kids a lift

*Nonprofits join with Woodmere, other schools to teach bike skills, safety*

By ANNA JOHNS Issue date: Tue, Mar 21, 2006

*The Tribune*

**When Ibou Heita's bicycle was stolen last year, he was devastated. He used the bike to visit friends, get to school and burn off preadolescent energy on the streets of the Brentwood-Darlington neighborhood.**

"I usually put it inside my house," said Ibou, 10. "But one time I left it out front and went inside to watch a movie. When I came out, it was gone."

One of Ibou's classmates, 10-year-old Jose Cordova, also needs a bicycle. His wasn't stolen, possibly because it's not exactly tempting to a would-be thief.

"My bike is rusted and broken so I can't ride it," Jose said. "I used to race it in the streets, but now it won't go."

Last week, Ibou, Jose and 13 other classmates received bicycles as part of a popular after-school program at Woodmere Elementary School, 7900 S.E. Duke St.

The program, simply called Bike Club, is a joint operation by the nonprofit Community Cycling Center and the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods, or SUN, program, a cooperative school support organization run by Multnomah County and schools in the county.

## **'A positive place to be'**

Each semester, students at seven Portland schools and one in the David Douglas district spend one or two afternoons a week with bicycling experts and at least one school liaison (usually a teacher). The fourth- and fifth-graders learn bicycle mechanics and safety, map reading, and the rules of the road.

"It's designed to engage kids and give them a positive place to be," said Gabe Graff, program manager for the cycling center, which was founded in 1994 to help young people through community-oriented recreational and educational bicycle programs and services.

Each student is assigned a bicycle and, when the 13-week course is completed, takes home the bike, a helmet and a lock. The bicycles are refurbished by mechanics at the center, which receives about 7,000 donated bicycles each year.

Educators with the center are trained by the Association for Experiential Education, a national nonprofit group that advocates teaching through experience. This semester, instructors will help the students repair flat tires and perform general bike maintenance. They'll also lead rides that the kids plot out on maps.

"Kids who aren't finding success in math class and standardized testing can feel like they're successful here," Graff said.

Each school recruits children for the program. At Woodmere, a SUN representative asked the fourth- and fifth-grade teachers to nominate students for Bike Club. The program targets students who have trouble getting to school or whose parents can't afford a bicycle. At Woodmere, a lot of students fall into those categories.

"Over 85 percent of our students are on free and reduced lunch," said Diane Selbin, SUN site manager.

## **Riders line up**

The SUN program is in 52 schools in six school districts across Multnomah County. Funded by private, state and federal grants, the program serves more than 14,000 children, most of them from needy families.

At Woodmere, SUN coordinators cycle children through art and sports programs every day after school. Instructors also guide students through homework and pass out snacks.

While many of the SUN programs are standard, others like drama and Bike Club are grant-funded. For the next three years, Bike Club is primarily funded through a grant from the Portland Children's Investment Fund, a voter-approved, \$8.5 million fund designed to support programs that help children.

"Bike Club is first come, first served," Selbin said. "We almost always have a waiting list."

Ibou Heita finally joined Bike Club this month, after being on the waiting list for two semesters. As soon as he gets to take his bicycle home, Ibou has big plans.

"I'm going to take it to my friend's house," he said. "And I will always lock it or bring it inside."

To learn more about the Community Cycling Center, visit its Web site, [www.communitycyclingcenter.org](http://www.communitycyclingcenter.org).

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