

Wheeling in smiles, one bike at a time

Logan Burtch-Buus, The Explorer | Updated Yesterday (4/12/17)

Several weeks ago Tucson resident Rosanna Velasco returned to her temporary home at the Gospel Rescue Mission to find her three-year-old son, Zack, astride a bright green bicycle, wearing a blue helmet emblazoned with flames and a smile spreading from ear to ear. Quite surprised to find her son on a new bike, Velasco said she was even more surprised to hear the bike now belonged to her son, thanks to the efforts of a group of volunteers from Oro Valley.

Founded 10 years ago by Sun City Oro Valley resident Dick Swain, WFK collects donations of new and used bicycles and refurbishes (or tunes up) the equipment for use by underprivileged children and their families, refugees, and others within the greater Tucson community. An all-volunteer staff, WFK partners with community and service organizations to locate those in-need of a memorable gift.

“The tagline exemplifies how I feel about it, and how we all still feel about it,” Swain said. “Everyone remembers their first bike.” Swain said the group got its start as a spinoff of two other organizations within the Sun City community, Seniors For Kids, which comprises of men and women making toys and crafts and collecting supplies for families in-need, and the local cycling club. As a member of both organizations, Swain said he one day

realized the potential of his two hobbies, and began talking with his fellow cyclists. After 10 individuals volunteered, the organization got off the ground by using the philanthropic connections of its fore groups.

It didn't take long to get the ball—or in this case the tire—rolling. Wheels For Kids has grown since 2007, now staffed by a team of roughly 40 volunteers, and recently celebrated a significant milestone when it donated its 2,000th bike to Zack.

“He loves bikes,” Velasco said of her son. “He was just really happy; he was showing it off, had his picture taken because he is very proud of it, and he loves his helmet as well.”

Velasco said her son has developed quite a fascination with bicycles and motorcycles despite his young age; his father, grandparents and uncle are all avid motorcycle-riders, and Zack had previously been riding around on a plastic tricycle – or what he referred to as his motorcycle.

“It means a lot to me and my son,” she said. “Being in recovery and in a place like this, it shows that there are still really good people out there and God has blessed us. They are a blessing, giving back to us.”

For WFK president Tom Terfehr, who said he joined the group as a mechanic, the small moments shared with families like the Velascos are what make the time behind the wrench worth it. “It seemed to me, and I think this is true for a number of mechanics, that it is a great way to use your skills for a good cause,” he said. “I always imagine that when I am working on a bike, that this is going to someone's grandkid. It could be going to mine, and that's really what motivates me. It's partly just giving something back to someone who might otherwise not ever have a chance to ride a bike.”

Whether sitting on 12-inch wheels or 700C adult tires, WFK mechanic Ernie Fisher said the process of rehabbing donations (or tuning up new bikes) all depends on the quality of product donated to the group. Once a bike is received, Fisher said a mechanic assesses its individual needs, disassembles it and begins an extensive cleaning process. Anything that cannot be tuned back into full use is replaced, and the end result is a shining bike that looks like it just rolled off the line.

Though youth like Zack don't yet comprehend the amount of team effort and labor it took to retool his bike, Velasco said she will use the experience as an opportunity to impart future life lessons upon her son: teamwork, the importance of charity and the value of possessions, to name a few.

Already past its 2,000th donation, Swain and Terfehr said WFK only has room to grow, and will continue its mission of providing less fortunate members of their community with their first bikes. More information on the group and how to get involved can be found at www.azwfk.org.

WFK Editor's note: Dick Swain's name was misspelled in the original article. It is correct in this reprint.