

Pedal Power from Donated Bicycles

by Adrian Larose

A disused bicycle in your garage or basement could become a helping hand for someone in Africa, thanks to a Canadian group that is preparing to send bicycles from Ottawa to Namibia this fall.

Bicycles for Humanity collects donated bicycles in wealthy countries like Canada. The organization currently has groups in Whistler, B.C., Kelowna, B.C., Brampton, Thunder Bay and several other communities. These groups then send the bikes to carefully chosen organizations in poorer countries.

"Our focus is home-based care volunteer communities," said Seb Oran, 43, who is organizing and promoting the organization's Ottawa groups—and Ottawa bike collection—in her spare time, along with Sandra Gattola, 37. That phrase is a bit of a mouthful, but it means the bikes go to people who will not

only use them to provide essential services like health care to others, but will have the know-how and parts to maintain and fix them.

A partner organization called BEN (Bicycle Empowerment Network) in Namibia helps find appropriate recipients, or, more accurately, helps create them. BEN "trains the community," Oran said, "to become a sustainable means of transportation. They also evaluate the impact and monitor the progress of the projects."

It's a concept Bicycles for Humanity calls a Bicycle Empowerment Centre. It has already been implemented in Africa, using bikes collected by the organization. "Shipping Bicycles to Africa is a start but is not enough. Bicycles need repair, maintenance, a safe storage place, and mechanics need training, tools and spare parts," Oran said.

Bicycles for Humanity shipped three such centres last year, Oran said, and five more earlier in 2007. Another batch,

including Ottawa's, is planned for the fall.

The bikes will help children reach school, doctors reach patients, and others accomplish many, many other necessary tasks. Pedal power is a practical and efficient way to get around in a country where roads are often not built for motorized traffic and where many people hardly have enough money to survive, never mind buy a vehicle. (Of course, bikes are very appropriate in wealthier communities like Ottawa, too!)

"With bicycles, community based volunteers can see more clients, deliver more supplies, bring more goods to market, fetch more water and firewood," Oran said. "It's a chance to improve the livelihood of people in the developing world—to

make a sustainable difference."

Bikes collected in Ottawa this fall will go to the House of Love for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Rundu, Namibia. Bicycles for Humanity aims to fill one sea shipping container with the Ottawa bikes—about 400 bicycles. The organization also buys the container. Once in Africa, the large rectangular box serves as a building where riders can learn about and repair their new wheels.

Bicycles for Humanity is seeking mountain and hybrid bicycles, including youth sizes. Bikes must be in good working order, though bikes needing minor repairs are cheerfully accepted. Road bikes and children's bikes are not needed, due to road conditions and needs in Namibia. Also needed are spare

parts for bicycles, such as tires, tubes, locks and chains, and volunteers to help make it all run smoothly.

A benefit concert is scheduled at Barrymore's, on Bank Street north of Somerset Street West, for September 14. The bicycle collection is planned for September 29, location yet to be announced. Please try to bring bikes on this exact day, as it is difficult (or impossible) for organizers to collect and store large numbers of bikes any earlier. To confirm details or for more information, visit <www.bicycles-for-humanity.org/Ottawa/index.php>, e-mail <Ottawa@bicycles-for-humanity.org> or phone 613-271-3003.

Adrian Larose is a member of the PEN editorial committee.

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