

Trip Sets Samaritan's Wheels Turning

Va. Boy Leads Ambitious Effort To Send Bicycles to Africans

By Nikita Stewart

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When 11-year-old Winston Duncan was on vacation in southern Africa in August, the Arlington boy watched people walk and walk and walk.

Eventually, he realized that walking -- many times, long distances -- was the only way the people had to get around, he said. There were few cars, fewer buses. "The people were just walking so much," Winston said. "It was such a hard sight to see. I couldn't take it."

When the fifth-grader returned home, he brainstormed with his mother on how to get people from Point A to Point B other than on two feet. Their answer: on two wheels.

Four months after his trip, the boy organized a bike collection in Arlington.

On Friday and Saturday, people pulled up in their minivans, sport-utility vehicles and hatchbacks to give away 10-speeds, three-speeds and toddler bikes that were too old, too small or too rusted.

Winston hoped to collect 75 bikes to send to Namibia, in southwest Africa. He wound up with 160 and had a few calls to pick up more.

"It's amazing," he said. "We got twice as many as our goal."

Winston pulled together the event -- at Nottingham Elementary School on Friday and Yorktown High School on Saturday -- with the help of his mother and a savvy that belies his age: He publicized his efforts by creating a Web site, contacting the media, passing out fliers at stores and holding an assembly Tuesday at Nottingham with a

representative from the Namibian Embassy at his side.

Dixie Duncan, Winston's mother, said her son has always been sensitive to the needs of others and aware of poverty around the world as a result of their frequent foreign travel. Two hours into Saturday's collection, Winston was talking about applying for a grant to continue his work, as well as holding a big bike collection on Earth Day. "I want to try to make it bigger," he said.

The bikes came in all sizes and colors as owners wistfully parted with birthday or Christmas gifts, that mode of transportation that got them to work or in shape.

"I paid \$400 for that bike," said Mary Lynn Skutley, 51, as a volunteer wheeled away her 15-year-old, silver 12-speed Raleigh with the pink bottle holder. "I didn't even spend that much for a car. I always bought my cars used."

She remembered that a previous, much cheaper bike had broken in half as it rode through Arlington Cemetery. Skutley rode the Raleigh for the last time about a year ago. "I commuted on it, from Adams Morgan to Virginia," said Skutley, who lives in Arlington and works in publishing.

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She has replaced it with another Raleigh. This time around, she paid \$550.

For 12-year-old Emily Herring and her mother, Anne Mayberry, parting with Emily's two-year-old, three-speed Raleigh prompted a brief debate. "It was pink," Emily said.

"Purple," Mayberry said.

"Pinkish-purple. Magenta," Emily said.

Although the color was up for interpretation, Emily explained that there was no disputing her parents' poor skills at hiding that particular Christmas gift. "They tried to hide it under a table," Emily said, revealing her green-and-red braces as she laughed.

Mayberry, 50, said they were giving the bike away not only to remove clutter from the garage but also to donate to a good cause. Emily had outgrown the bike. "We thought we should give it where they could use it," Mayberry said.

Saturday's collection was a group effort. Duncan coaches her son's basketball team and got all the players to help. The youths, their siblings and parents removed the pedals from each bike and tightened the handlebars to make them easier to ship.

To collect the bikes, Winston set up a nonprofit group called Wheels to Africa, and he contacted Bikes for the World, an Arlington-based organization that ships bicycles to developing countries, including some in Africa. To defray shipping costs, Winston collected \$10 from each donor.

Bicycles are expensive commodities in countries in Central America and Africa, where they generally are imported, said Keith Oberg, director of Bikes for the World.

"We're so affluent here. We discard these bikes," he said. "In some countries, it can mean a child can continue to go to school."

Oberg said the bikes will be reassembled by the Bicycling Empowerment Network, an organization in southern Africa that promotes the use of bicycles so poor communities can have low-cost access to employment, health care and education.

Winston was not so well-versed on exactly how the bikes would end up in Namibia, but he knew he wanted to do something. He was

amazed as the bikes trickled into the parking lot at Yorktown High.

"I can count them if you want," he said.

He remembered his first bicycle. "Oh, yes. It was a little bike, a Huffy," he said.

Winston got it during summer vacation in Pickens, S.C., where his grandmother Deda Duncan and aunt Donna Garrett taught him to ride. "I think I was 6 years old," he said.

And what's he riding now?

"Well, actually, I don't have a bike," he said. He had donated all of his bicycles to Wheels to Africa.