

Community bike center makes impact in Third Ward

Zachary Moser shares a common goal with many advocates who are passionate about cycling. He simply wants to see more people use bikes.

To accomplish his objective, Moser has turned to Houston's inner city to inspire the next generation of bicyclists.

At first glance, the city's Third Ward, a predominately African-American neighborhood with

deep cultural roots dating back to the end of the Civil War, might seem like a peculiar venue for a cycling program aimed at children. After all, many of these kids cut their recreational teeth on more mainstream activities like basketball and soccer.

However, Moser, 23, who grew up on the edge of the Third Ward, says bikes are wo-

ven into the fabric of the neighborhood.

"A lot of people in the Third Ward depend on bikes as a primary form of transportation, more so than people in other parts of the city," Moser said. "It's a common sight to see people young and old using bicycles to travel around the neighborhood."

In an effort to make bikes even more accessible to Third Ward residents, Moser, who graduated from Oberlin College in Ohio last December, has established a community outreach program called the Shade Tree Project.

With help from fellow Oberlin grads Catherine Goodman, Benjamin Mason and Seth Capron, Moser was awarded a grant from the California-based Compton Foundation Mentor Fellowship Program. The one-year \$20,000 grant has helped turn Moser's vision into reality.

For the past few months, Moser and his team have been renovating 1,000 square feet of the historic El Dorado building at the corner of Elgin and Dowling on the edge of downtown Houston. A space on the

first floor of the building, which used to be home to a diner, has been transformed into a community bike center.

The center opened Oct. 18 and can be used by anyone in the community. It is designed to be part bike repair shop and part classroom to teach children and teenagers the value of good old-fashioned hard work.

"We've been stockpiling tools and used bike parts to allow residents to use the center as a low-cost way to make repairs to their bikes," Moser said.

For \$2 a day, people can use the center and outtools to work on their bikes, and we've had bike mechanics volunteer to help out.

"We also have the earn-a-bike program that lets kids and adults use the shop, along with donated and recycled parts, to build a bike," Moser said. "Once they build the bike and help out around the shop, the bike is theirs to keep."

Volunteers at the center and those participating in the earn-a-bike program also are working on other bikes that

need fixing up. Once these bikes are ready to roll, many of them are being donated to neighborhood charities.

"We've found that the act of working on a bike, learning how to fix it and what makes it work can be a very empowering experience for kids," Moser said. "The idea that they can fix something, and then put it to use as a form of transportation, can lead kids to explore other things they can do for themselves."

Judging from the initial response from local residents, it is a welcomed opportunity. More than 20 people visited the center on opening day,

with 10 children committing to the earn-a-bike program. With a few more hours of work on tires and tubes, six of those youngsters already will earn their very own bike.

"We were really pleased with the response, especially since we're still accruing bikes and parts and doing a lot of work to the center," Moser said. "We haven't even formally opened yet."

Other upcoming programs of the Shade Tree Project are bike-education classes, safety seminars and an after-school program for middle school students interested in building low-rider and chopper bikes.

Moser is also researching avenues and options to secure additional funding to allow the project and the community bike center it's created to live on after the end of the grant period.

"We want to make a visible change in the community," Moser said. "Success to me will be seeing a lot more people in the neighborhood riding bicycles."

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Cycling Notebook

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