

Pedal Pushers

Oberlin-inspired bike co-ops in Houston and San Francisco help kids take the wheel

by Peter Meredith '02



In Houston, Third Ward's Chopper Club teaches artistry along with basic machining and welding skills. Posing with club members are Benjy Mason (left) and Zach Moser, both '02.

In an inner-city neighborhood of the sprawling, car-choked city of Houston, four Oberlin alumni are leading a bicycle revolution.

Seth Capron, Katy Goodman, Benjy Mason, and Zach Moser, all members of the Class of 2002, are founders of the Third Ward Community Bike Center, a lively nonprofit that teaches neighborhood residents how to make and repair their own bikes.

"In college we learned that bikes could be an awesome tool for teaching self-sufficiency, building confidence, and promoting community," says Goodman. "We wanted to take those ideas beyond Oberlin."

Third Ward is one of several bike centers around the country—such as the Bike Kitchen in San Francisco and the Ohio City Bicycle Co-op in Cleveland—founded by former students who worked with the Oberlin Bike Co-op. Based in the basement of Keep Cottage, the student-run learning center was founded in 1986 as a place for students and townspeople to construct and fix their own bikes.

Inspired by the philosophy, the founders of Third Ward chose to open shop in a city that couldn't be more different from Oberlin. "Houston is sort of a lawless place. It has few zoning laws, and it's huge and sprawling," says Capron. "Not having transportation isn't much of an option, especially in our inner-city neighborhood. There are no grocery stores, major banks, or even many jobs within two to three miles." Third Ward promotes bikes as an affordable means of transportation. Drop-in sessions, after-school programs, and even an Earn-a-Bike Program teach kids both to fix their own bicycles and to build bikes for themselves and local charities by using old parts. Services are free and attract about 200 people monthly; 70 percent are children and teens.

The program isn't just about bikes, however. "We're not bike activists," explains Moser. "Our main goal is to build community and empower kids by giving them access to a decision-making activity. Bikes are just the things we started with." More educational programs are down the road: expansion plans call for classes in silkscreen and sewing, plus the creation of a local clothing label for youth to market garments they make themselves.

Empowering kids through hands-on projects was a philosophy developed by the four Obies as organizers of community activities in Oberlin, such as the Big Parade. Begun by the group in 2001 as a way to facilitate youth-led projects, the parade has evolved into a yearly Oberlin tradition involving 1,500 participants and spectators.

"We created the format of the parade and set up workshops, but we then stepped back and invited people to participate in any way they wanted," says Moser. "Our big emphasis has always been on creating activities rather than providing ideology."

Yearning to continue their work after college, the alumni set off for Houston, where Moser's newly won Compton Mentor

Fellowship Grant provided \$20,000 in startup funds to establish the bike center. All four lived in a two-bedroom apartment for a year until other grants and donations allowed them to draw modest salaries for the full-time work.

“We chose to move to Houston specifically because it is not a place where most Oberlin students end up,” says Goodman. “Young people don’t flock here after leaving a liberal arts college like they do to other cities. We wanted to share our Oberlin values and ideas with an audience that’s not usually exposed to them.”



In contrast, another bike co-op started by members of the Class of 2002 is based in the San Francisco Bay area, a region that trails only New York and Boston in its population of 2002 Oberlinians. The Bike Kitchen is based in the Mission District, a historically Latino neighborhood undergoing rapid gentrification by a largely white, 20-something hipster crowd. The neighborhood is decidedly different from the Houston inner city, but the organization’s goals are similar to those of Third Ward.

“It’s all about teaching people to do things themselves and fostering a do-it-yourself mentality,” says Catherine Hartzell, who founded the center with Josh Adler, Forrest Crawford, and Jesse Basbaum. “It’s very powerful when someone comes in and realizes they don’t need to be intimidated about fixing

Catherine Hartzell '02 works a weekend drop-in session at the Bike Kitchen in San Francisco.

their own bike.” Like its Houston counterpart, the Bike Kitchen has drop-in hours, an Earn-a-Bike Program, and classes that teach residents how to repair bikes or build “art bikes.”

Bikes fixed by volunteers are donated to a day labor program and distributed to local immigrant workers.

The Bike Kitchen began humbly, when the alumni realized there were no such programs in their new city. “We had no resources, no bikes, and no money, so we thought, ‘Let’s have a bake sale!’” laughs Hartzell. With the \$200 they earned, they set up shop in a warehouse donated by a local arts organization. “At first, we were open just one day a week. Slowly, people began hearing about us, and excitement built.”

These days, the center is open three days a week and serves nearly 200 people per month. Operating on a yearly budget of \$5,000, the Bike Kitchen is run entirely by volunteers, half of whom are Oberlin alumni. The center stays afloat by using bike parts donated by local shops and by suggesting small fees. Widely recognized as leaders of the San Francisco bike community, the four founders received the San Francisco Bike Coalition’s annual Golden Wheel award in April.

In Cleveland, the Ohio City Bicycle Co-op is a four-year-old organization that also drew inspiration from Oberlin. Sadhu Johnston '98, who was running Cleveland’s Green Building Coalition at the time, helped organize the co-op and find space to open shop. “My whole idea for how it should operate was born out of the the Oberlin Bike Co-op,” says Johnston, who now works in Chicago as Mayor Richard Daley’s assistant for green initiatives.

Each of the centers maintains relationships with the Oberlin Bike Co-op. Third Ward regularly hosts winter-term interns; the Bike Kitchen draws volunteers from an ever-expanding pool of local Oberlin alums; and the Cleveland center holds a 70-mile “co-op to co-op” ride with Oberlin students.

Current students, in turn, draw inspiration from the work of graduates. “Our mechanics are always excited to learn about creative twists the Houston or San Francisco crews have made to our basic bike co-op programs,” says Oberlin Co-op Co-president Thomas Anderson-Monterosso '06. “It’s comforting to know that life after graduation can be fun and bike-filled.”

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