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## PEDAL POWER



Carlos Antonio Rios / Chronicle

Curtis Odgie, 10, adjusts the seat of the bike he has put together as part of the Earn-A-Bike program at the Third Ward Community Bike Center. The first bike he put together was stolen.

Participants in the Third Ward Earn-A-Bike program learn where there's a wheel, there's a way

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provide inexpensive transportation to Third Ward residents who can't afford cars.

"We want to make inexpensive bikes and bike repair available to everyone in the Third Ward," said co-founder Catherine Goodman.

Anyone looking for a handout will be disappointed. Earning a bike takes work, time and commitment, said Zachary Moser, one of four graduates of Ohio's Oberlin College who officially opened the Bike Center in October.

Before earning their own bike, participants such as Odgie are asked to fix up another bike in the task-based, Earn-A-Bike program. Those are given to local charities.

On a recent Saturday, the atmosphere at the center — at the corner of Elgin and Dowling, in the same building as the recently renovated Eldorado Ballroom — was lively and busy. Several teens worked on bikes that had been mounted on stands and were in various stages of repair. Some needed tires, others brakes or a chain. Most people, such as 14-year-old DeMarcus Woods, worked at their own speed, with help when they needed it from Benjy Mason, Seth Capron, Moser or Goodman.

These bike gurus have transformed the interior of the building, originally a diner, and painted it a bright yellow, with green trim. On the back wall is a colorful graffiti-like mural painted by a friend of Moser's.

"We built another wall and put in all these windows," Goodman said. "There were windows there originally, but they had been covered up for 40 years. It was very dark in here, so it really opened the space up."

Goodman, a lifelong cyclist who grew up in Oakland, Calif., learned about bike repair at Oberlin's bike co-op. That's also where she met Capron, Moser and Mason.

Moser, 23, who studied studio art at Oberlin, is a graduate of Houston's Lamar High School. He began volunteering with Project Row Houses, a Third Ward nonprofit group, during college breaks. At Oberlin, he used his experience in the bike co-op and encouraged local youths to make floats out of bikes, as well as low rider and chopper bikes, that were used in parades.

"I'm more into working with kids than with bikes," Moser



James Nielsen photos / Special to the Chronicle

Seth Capron, left, helps Michael Busby, 12, remove a freewheel from a bicycle at the Third Ward Community Bike Center.

said. "But I like to find things for them to do. It's a way to teach other things, like learning an analytical process — looking at something and figuring out what is wrong.

"You want to fix the bike, so you can ride around on it. You figure out a problem, and no one is forcing you to do it," he explained. "Then you earn the bike and get to transport yourself from one place to another. Maybe you don't need a car, or if you do, you learn how to fix it yourself."

Inspired by other bicycle co-ops around the country, like the 20-year-old nonprofit Bikes Not Bombs in Boston, Moser decided to try a bike project in Houston. It just seemed like the right time. With the help of his bike pals, he applied to foundations and received a one-year \$20,000 grant from the Compton Foundation Mentor Fellowship program, based in California.

Last August, the four friends packed their personal bikes in a truck, along with some tools, and drove to Houston from Ohio. The four share a house and other ex-

penses, doing odd jobs — like valet parking at last week's Super Bowl — to supplement their tiny incomes.

Project Row Houses donated a 1,000-square-foot space, and the group got busy with renovations. They have since expanded to 1,800 square feet and are now adding a restroom and office space.

"There are a lot of people into bikes in Houston, but it's not as much of a bike culture compared to some other cities," Moser said. "So, we thought we could fill a void. I think transportation in general is becoming more of an issue, especially with the price of gas. It's become like a political statement to ride a bike."

Response from the community has been good, and so far, close to 300 bikes, in various shapes, as well as parts and accessories, have been donated by individuals and local bike shops, Goodman said.

As Odgie happily rode out the front door with his new bike, watched by several friends, the rules of the Earn-A-Bike program were explained.

chains, and sorting them into different boxes or areas.

The next step is to patch a tube or two, so flat tires can be fixed. After that, participants fix up a bike. Some bikes were given away at Christmas.

Only then can they pick a bike and fix it up for themselves.

It takes most people 8 to 10 hours to complete the task, Mason said. A few can do it in one long day, while most take three to four days. The center is open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays and 4-9 p.m. Wednesdays.

The plan is to offer extended hours later this month, as demand increases.

On Tuesdays, the group works with students in Project Row Houses' after-school program. In March, Moser hopes to offer an art bike class — the bikes are decorated like art cars — at a local middle school.

More educational programs are planned down the road, and the four will soon start looking for more grants. They dream of one day getting a bike path installed in the area.

Woods, who has a bike, enjoys volunteering his time. Others come in to learn how to fix their bikes up.

"I'm just a biking kind of person," said Woods, holding an adjustable wrench. "I live around the corner and saw this place and wondered what it was going to be. When I found out, I started coming over and helping. It's going to be really good for the community."



DeMarcus Woods, 14, and Zachary Moser, right, sort bicycle parts and tools while taking apart a bike.

## Participants in the Third Ward Earn-A-Bike program learn where there's a wheel, there's a way



James Nielsen / Special to the Chronicle

Catherine Goodwin, left, teaches Tiffany Laday, 14, how to adjust a bike's brakes.

By **BARBARA KARKABI**  
Houston Chronicle

Curtis Odigie replaced a rusty chain, checked out his tires and put the finishing touches on his spiffy blue bicycle.

Curtis, 10, didn't find it under the Christmas tree. Instead, he spent several Saturdays putting the bike together in an Earn-A-Bike program sponsored by the Third Ward Community Bike Center.

If the fourth-grader looked a little more serious than might be expected, there was a good reason. This is the second bike he has fixed up for himself in the past few months. The first, a labor of love that he worked on in the fall, was stolen.

"I was mad, I was sad, and I was about to cry," Odigie said, when he discovered his bike was gone. "It went real fast, and it was my bike."

He is one of 35 people, ranging in age from 7 to 58, who have earned bikes through the new program. Another 46 have bike rehabs under way. Most are local students — teens and younger — who come in on Saturdays to work at the lively new center, free for those under 16.

While their goal is education and recycling, center co-founders agree that it's also about empowerment.

Through bikes, the program provides a service that gives neighborhood kids something to do, is fun and teaches them skills they can use all their lives. The bikes also

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### **THIRD WARD COMMUNITY BIKE CENTER, 2320 ELGIN**

■ **Hours:** 4-9 p.m. Wednesdays; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays.

■ **Cost:** Free for anyone under 16. Otherwise, one-time shop use costs \$2 for Third Ward residents and \$5 for nonresidents. Six-month memberships (unlimited use) cost \$9 for residents, \$17 for students and \$21 for nonresidents.

■ **Donations:** The Bike Center needs bikes in all conditions. Bikes that are no longer usable can still be used for parts.

■ **Info:** Call 713-807-7911 or go to [www.thirdwardbikes.org](http://www.thirdwardbikes.org).