

Wrench Raiders lends a hand to the homeless cyclists

Founder C.J. Speelman talks about connecting with the hidden bike culture of Portland

BY TERRIS HARNED
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In April, 2010, C.J. Speelman founded Wrench Raiders, a grassroots organization of volunteers who help maintain bikes for people who are homeless or with no other source of income or transportation. The California transplant calls himself a self-taught mechanic who put himself in this line of work after seeing the need among people who were homeless who relied solely on their bikes for mobility, but who couldn't afford to fix them. A flat tire or faulty breaks could be crippling and even fatal. But equally important; a solid, well-oiled steed is independence, opportunity and survival.

Wrench Raiders operates a mobile repair shop that provides repairs at no charge, but underlying the work is a message of building community and connecting social classes, inside and outside.

Terris Harned: Tell me a little about Wrench Raiders. How did you guys get started? Who do you serve exactly? Can anyone come and get assistance?

C.J. Speelman: I started a non-profit about six years ago that was primarily focused on creating a space to build community for people who were experiencing homelessness in my area. I learned a lot about my new friends and the problems and experiences they faced every day. One of the largest hurdles they faced was the issue of transportation. So many people take the ability to get from here to there for granted. I knew I did. I found out quickly that bicycles could be a great source of transportation, but they were prone to disrepair. I began to learn how to fix bikes, building up my own bike from just a frame. When I moved to Portland two years ago, one of the main reasons was to develop this concept of a mobile bicycle repair shop. We did some research, made a few connections and Wrench Raiders was born April 2010.

Our main purpose behind fixing bikes is this idea of creating and developing community among people who live outside and who live inside. I would guess that our mission is three-fold: We want to engage the bicycling culture of Portland in social justice, advocate the bicycle as a viable alternative to the automobile as a form of transportation and most importantly, build community.



C.J. Speelman works on a bike during a Sunday Wrench Raiders session under the Hawthorne Bridge.

PHOTO COURTESY OF C.J. SPEELMAN

We do not provide bikes for people. We try to limit our services to those who cannot afford to have their bikes fixed at a normal shop which at this moment are our friends who are experiencing homelessness in Portland.

T.H.: What direction would you like to see Wrench Raiders go? What is your long term vision for the organization?

C.J.S.: I would love to be able to facilitate multiple times that we would fix bikes during the week while building a solid group

of volunteers that would fix bikes among other things. Also, we are trying to find a Cargo Trike to carry our shop in so that we would be truly mobile. The long-term vision is to pretty much fix all the bikes for free we can.

T.H.: In a minor way, this sort of reminds me of that Tool Library project that has been going on. To my mind, it's sort of ironic that we now have a centralized location to borrow tools from, where once upon a time we might just visit our neighbor, or the guy down the street. What you said just made me think,

though, about community and such things, and I think that's great. Do you see possibilities for this project to become a bridge between the classes?

C.J.S.: I really want to see the bike culture in Portland connect with the "hidden" bike culture that exists. Bicyclists generally are great at building community with each other. There is a certain amount of camaraderie that exists. If we can harness that energy and work together I think we could do a lot of good and at the same time build a stronger community for our friends who live outside. So yeah, this resembles a sort of bridge and you don't necessarily have to be a bicyclist to hang either. We also want to be a community that empowers people. We do that at Wrench Raiders simply by fixing bicycles, but on a larger scale we want to teach folks how to fix their own bicycles.

T.H.: That was going to be one of my next questions. When you're working on a bike, do you talk to the person you're helping, and show them how to do it? Or is that more of a thing for the future?

C.J.S.: Right now we either allow people to borrow our tools and fix their own bike if they know how, or we can guide them through the process to make sure they do it right. If they are not interested, we will just fix their bike, but the hope is to eventually engage them in the process of learning how to fix their own bicycle, at least basic things like changing their tires, adjusting their brakes, etc.

T.H.: If someone wants to contribute to Wrench Raiders, either financially or as a volunteer, how can they do that? I seem to recall you mentioning once in a previous conversation that you try to stay away from used parts, because they're just too unpredictable, right?

C.J.S.: We really don't want to use any used parts because we would not be certain if they would fit any of the bikes that we work on. Sometimes parts are pretty specific to the bike or type of bike. If someone wants to give to Wrench Raiders, the easiest way is through our Web site. They can click on the Support page www.wrenchraiders.net/support/ and choose an option. We are in need of monthly partnerships to keep what we do sustainable and ensure we meet the needs of our friends. If they are interested in volunteering, our Web site has list of volunteer needs at www.wrenchraiders.net/get-involved/

Terris Harned is a Street Roots vendor. You can buy a paper from him outside Food Front at NW 23rd Avenue and Thurman.

Housing Authority seeks funding change for public housing

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
STAFF WRITER

The Housing Authority of Portland's board of commissioners voted unanimously on Tuesday, March 15 to pursue an application to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to change the funding stream for 1,200 units of subsidized, public housing for low-income people.

The Housing Authority of Portland (HAP) owns and operates 1,200 public housing units in 10 high rise buildings. Public housing is limited to people and families on extremely low-incomes, the elderly and disabled. Residents pay no more than 30 percent of their incomes in rent; the rest of the rent is subsidized by HAP and funding from HUD.

HAP wants to switch the type of subsidy people receive from a public housing subsidy to project-based Section 8 vouchers. Section 8 vouchers are funded by a different HUD funding stream and is like public

housing in the sense that a low-income person pays no more than 30 percent of their rent. If a Section 8 voucher is "project-based," it means the subsidy is connected with the physical living unit — whoever lives in that unit will receive the subsidy.

HAP wants to make the change in order to pay for a number of capital improvements to the buildings, which are in need of electrical and plumbing repairs, as well as new siding, carpeting, and other major repairs totalling about \$30 million.

"We don't have any way of financing those capital needs," says Shelley Marchesi, HAP's spokesperson.

By converting the units to project-based Section 8 units, HAP will be able to access tax-credit financing, meaning that the agency will be able to secure equity and take on debt for the buildings. By doing so, it will be able to make the capital improvements and secure the buildings for low-income housing for another 50 years.

"Underpinning all of this work is that we

need to preserve housing for low-income people," says Mike Andrews, HAP's director of development and community revitalization.

Because Section 8 vouchers have stricter income restrictions than public housing, approximately 66 people — including 30 low-income, full-time students — will no longer be able to live at the units. Dianne Quast, HAP's director of real estate operations, told the board of commissioners that HAP will help the tenants relocate to comparable housing.

Marchesi says HAP will not go forward with the application if HUD refuses to give tenants the same legal protections they currently have as tenants of public housing (primarily eviction rights). She also says that if HUD does not give HAP additional Section 8 vouchers, they will not go through with the switch.

"We're not going to take vouchers out of our existing voucher pool," Marchesi says. Advocates for affordable housing think

the move on HAP's part is generally positive.

Bobby Weinstock, housing consultant for Northwest Pilot Project, which serves elderly, low-income Portlanders, says housing authorities across the country are letting their public housing properties foreclose, rather than invest in the buildings and ensure they remain affordable.

"Our housing authority is going in a very different direction," Weinstock says. "They want to preserve the hard units. They're exactly on the right track here in preserving the buildings."

He and Micky Ryan, an affordable housing advocate and lawyer, worry that there is a risk that HAP may not be able to pay back any private debt it collects to pay for the capital improvements. If that becomes the case for some reason, the private investors could take over the building.

"It seems like a small risk," Weinstock says. "The benefit is great if they can extend the life of these buildings."