

Changing the world two wheels at a time

By ERIC A. HOWALD
Of the Keizertimes

Christopher Hensley leads me into a 20-by-16 basement filled with bikes. Bikes hanging. Bikes standing. Bikes upside down on repair mounts. Bike frames in piles, nothing of value left on them.

White tags signal bikes that have been claimed by current volunteers at Salem's Northwest Hub who are working off the cost. The Hub expanded so quickly, this second room — twice the size of the first — was claimed for the non-profit supplying low-cost bikes and bike repair.

"If the bike has been parked on, we'll take it in and strip it for parts," Hensley says. Hensley has volunteered with the program nearly since its inception and is something of an evangelist for pedal power and Hub itself.

Northwest Hub started as an outreach project by Kirk Seyfert, one of the head pastors at Evergreen Church of Salem at the corner of Cottage Street Northeast and D Street Northeast in Salem.

"We had some members of the church who found work on swing shifts or night shifts and they needed transportation because the buses didn't work for their schedule," Seyfert said.

As a former cycling competitor, Seyfert knew the benefits of riding and had an inkling for getting some of his congregation back on their way to self-sufficiency. He'd find them bicycles.

Seyfert said the demand for the service was immediately

evident, particularly when it came to the homeless population. However, it wasn't long before he made contact with the De Muniz Resource Center, which handles re-entry issues for formerly incarcerated individuals.

"A parolee's No. 1 issue for getting back on their feet is transportation," Seyfert said. "Transportation is really the issue for the most vulnerable people in our community."

While getting people moving — within the church and outside of it — was the first goal, Seyfert wanted to make bike repair education an integral part of the program. For that, he tapped Aaron Ryals.

"Racing is such a small portion of the population that could benefit from a bicycle. If you have \$500 and want to race, that's one thing. If you've got \$50 and need to get to work, you may not know what to do," Ryals said. "One of our goals is to close that gap."

Ryals once worked at a bike shop near Salem's Union Gospel Mission and tried to offer community education classes as part of the services of the shop, but said it simply wasn't feasible.

"The classic business model for a brick-and-mortar shop doesn't have an easy way to make community education part of it. We tried it and we couldn't make it work with the restraints of the business," Ryals said.

That didn't mean community need wasn't there. When the Hub started offering classes last winter, more than two doz-



Aaron Ryals and Kirk Seyfert at work in the Hub shop at Evergreen Church of Salem. KEIZERTIMES/Eric A. Howald

en people would line up in the cold to take part.

"The class Aaron teaches is impeccable. He covers bike repair to nut, bolt and bearing. It doesn't matter if it has 12 wheels or one," Hensley said.

By taking the class, and volunteering at the center, participants can "earn" a refurbished bike. One hour of volunteer work is worth \$20 toward the cost of the bike.

"Last year, we put 220 bikes out on the road for clients and volunteers," Seyfert said.

Hub provides tools for on-site work or clients are welcome

to bring their own. With help from other churches, Hub has two fully-stocked workrooms, but it's bulging at the seams. Seyfert is in negotiations for a dedicated space for the project. Still, each month, the non-profit spends about \$1,000 on consumables like tubes, cables and rubber. It recoups some of the money by selling higher-end refurb through Habitat for Humanity's ReStore in Salem, those even come with a limited maintenance and adjustment warranty.

While each bike is putting someone back on the road,

mobility is becoming a means to a different end.

"I had one of our clients stop by who told me just the confidence he gained by volunteering was a catalyst for seeking employment after giving up. It changing his perspective. He's since landed a job," Seyfert said.

Seyfert is eager for a dedicated space not only to rescue more bikes from the landfills, but because it could create job opportunities.

"If we can take this to the next level, maybe we create those jobs," Seyfert said.

In the meantime, the program would benefit from financial donations. Seyfert would also rather see bikes donated to Hub rather than go into the landfill even if it means tighter quarters.

Hensley got his start at Hub turning wrenches himself, but hung around so long he's in something of a volunteer supervisor while others apply the elbow grease. He's seen and experienced the transformation the program can provide.

"We have access to the knowledge. We'll give it to anybody who is willing to listen and learn. You can take someone who is 60 and put them on a bike and they'll feel 40 again," Hensley said. "It's about getting people mobile so they can make it to medical appointments, see family ... get to work. They have legs again and can go make the world a better place."

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