

Need a bike? -- Frayser's bicycle man re-cycles for needy kids

Commercial Appeal, The (Memphis, TN) - Monday, June 5, 2006

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Edition: Final

Section: Metro

Page: B1

The bikes and bike parts and tools are sorted into separate areas now, out of the various flower gardens Bill Heath tends for his wife at their house in Frayser.

Back before he gave away those 78 rebuilt bikes in the spring, Bill heard plenty from Fay.

"We had the place all covered up in bikes," Heath says now, as new piles of bikes begin to bloom. "My wife was about ready to kick me out."

Ah, but the kids in Frayser, they love seeing the bicycle man's red truck, filled with rehabilitated bikes, approach their neighborhoods.

"It's not a scientific thing I do," Heath says. "I get into a truck and go to a place where I see kids playing, I go right up amongst them and ask, 'You have a bike?' They say 'yep' or 'no,' and then I go find their parents or whoever it is looks after 'em and ask is it OK if I give them a bike.

"If they have one that's all tore up, I'll trade 'em."

How 73-year-old Bill Heath became the bicycle man of Frayser is a story about a neighborhood's evolution, and also something sweet and simple - the uncomplicated joy provided by a simple two-wheeled machine.

It all started when the K's moved into the cove, right next door to Bill and Fay Heath.

They were from Milwaukee - Kion (6), Kamonte (11), Kamiah (12), Kiana (14) - and they charmed Bill and Fay right off.

Thus did the retired white couple from the country become friends with the black kids from Milwaukee.

"We just sort of fell in line with those little fellas," Bill says.

Fay noticed they didn't have much in the way of toys, and before long Bill and Fay had driven to Alabama to get some old toys and bikes from their son.

Kiana, the oldest girl, got the first bike, but Kion, the youngest boy, loved his more than any of

them.

Then the girls across the street had their bikes stolen, so Bill refurbished a few more and word spread at church about his hobby, bringing in more bikes. He would strip down ruined frames, salvage good seats or brakes, and make necessary repairs on those needing minor fixes.

He has tried to involve a big store like Wal-Mart, which destroys bikes that are returned or damaged in shipment, without much luck.

Mostly, he gets bikes from friends or neighboring apartment complexes.

"It has made an impact because he goes where kids' parents normally can't afford bicycles and gives them away with no strings attached," says Frank Holland, publisher of the North Shelby Times. "He doesn't want anything in return."

Before he sold River City Supply Co. and retired, before he and Fay bought and sold Northgate Lanes (all three Heath sons rolled sanctioned 300 games), before he got married in 1957 and moved to Frayser in 1959, Bill Heath lived on a Tipton County farm as a middle child in a crowded family that grew to 16 brothers and sisters.

He can still recall the day he found his first bike, a red Streamline, off the side of an old country road.

He reckons he was about 12.

"I rolled that rascal home and set it up there and dreamed of being able to ride it one day," Heath says. "It was just an ol' used bike, but I thought it was a Cadillac."

It took a few weeks for his father to locate some tires - funny thing, too, since wheels remain the most elusive part for Heath even now.

Once he learned how to ride it, young Bill nearly wore out the dirt drive that led 200 yards down to the main highway.

"That was the joy of my life for a good while," Heath says, his usually understated voice vibrant with memory. "I enjoyed learning how to ride that bike more than I did learning how to drive a car."

When he fixed up those first bikes for the K's, 6-year-old Kion and his siblings rewarded Heath by reminding him of the pure joy he once felt. It's something he thinks about as he works a rusted bolt or fits a chain, and it makes him happy.

There is still love in the way Bill and Fay talk about the K's, even though they've not heard from the family since the day they moved in 2004.

Fay: "Kion was just the cutest thing. He loved to talk to Bill. He'd come over, say, 'Can Mr. Bill talk to me?' "

Bill: "He was my buddy."

Fay: "Oh, the day they left, I just cried. Kion cried, too."

Bill remembers something else from that last day.

"You know, that little fella, when he was getting ready to leave," Bill says, forming a wistful grin, "he made sure he loaded his bike up all by hisself."

- Zack McMillin : 529-2564

Little wheels needed

Bill Heath says he has plenty of parts and frames but needs small bike wheels more than anything else.

Contact him before donating (he asked that his number, which is listed, not be published), but only call if the bike is in good condition.

He mostly wants to talk to anyone who can help him convince Wal-Mart to give him access to its discarded bikes.

- Zack McMillin

Caption: Photos

Photos by Mark Weber/The Commercial Appeal Bill Heath , a retiree in Frayser, collects and repairs broken bikes that are then given away to needy neighborhood children. Since starting two years ago, Heath estimates he's given away over 250 bikes. Maybe they're old bicycle parts now, but with some Bill Heath magic, they'll turn into new joys for needy children.

Memo: The Memphis Life

Index Terms: bicycling recycling aid child

Record Number: 11212EC891C38DEB

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Frayser's 'Bike Man' gets help with his mission -- Wal-Mart will donate parts from damaged bikes

Commercial Appeal, The (Memphis, TN) - Monday, July 3, 2006

Author/Byline: Zack McMillin

Edition: Final

Section: Metro

Page: B1

The Bike Man - a.k.a. Mr. Bill, a.k.a. Bill Heath of Frayser - pulls his pickup to a stop alongside a drainage ditch.

In the driveway, seven children watch and wait. In the back of the truck are five bicycles Heath has cobbled together with a variety of frames, wheels, tires and assorted parts.

Since Heath was featured in The Commercial Appeal on June 5, he has delivered nearly three dozen bikes to kids in Frayser.

His friend Jarvis 'Scooter' Owens saw the story and called wondering if Mr. Bill, as he calls him, could bring a load for his children and nieces and nephews over on Aiden Street.

"Hello there, fellas," Heath says, walking around to the front of the truck to greet the kids.

Here was Heath, a 73-year-old white man who grew up on farms in Tipton County, making friends with the black kids who had lived in Frayser their whole lives - 15-year-old Jasmine Shaw, 13-year-olds Dedrick and Frederick Brooks, 12-year-old Rantevious Brooks, 10-year-old Octavious Brooks, 6-year-old Martino Owens and 3-year-old Jerrianna Owens.

Jacqueline Brooks, mother of Octavious, Rantevious and Jasmine, brought the kids over when Scooter, her brother, said Heath was coming.

"Who wants a bike?" Heath calls out.

This draws the kids to the back of the truck, and Octavious grabs the first, a 20-inch green model. Dedrick wants the yellow one. Jasmine takes the pink one.

Soon enough, they are circling their dead-end street, bouncing the wheels, accelerating down a neighbor's inclined driveway, making plans to ride across Frayser to their grandmother's house.

Heath did not bring bikes for the "little ones," as he calls Martino and Jerrianna, but he returns 10 minutes later with small models.

After the story ran, people from as far away as Jackson, Tenn., dropped off dozens of salvageable bikes.

"We've been going through a bunch of 'em the last three weeks," Heath tells Owens.

Soon, Heath won't even need the donations - executives at Wal-Mart saw the article and a local manager has promised Heath he can retrieve parts from damaged and returned bikes.

The first time Owens saw Heath delivering bikes in his neighborhood last fall, he didn't quite know what to think.

As his 3-year-old girl pumps the pedals on a tiny model with training wheels, he makes the kids thank Heath several times.

"They're gonna ride 'em like crazy," Owens says.

"It's Christmas in June."

- Zack McMillin : 529-2564

Caption: Photos

Kenneth Cummings/The Commercial Appeal Martino Brooks, 6, mounts his new bicycle given to him by Bill Heath (far left). Heath fixes up old bikes for neighborhood children. Bill Heath , a 73-year-old bicycle repairman in the Frayser area, hands a refurbished bicycle to Octavious Brooks, 10, on Friday afternoon.

Memo: The Memphis Life

Record Number: 112A68B4080F3B80

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