



good

Thinking
globally while
trash-picking
locally!

*Now in central Ghana, this bike was in suburban Westfield, N.J. only six months ago.
Photo credit: David Schweidenback*

AMERICAN bicyclist

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Don't let bikes die!

by Geoff Thomas

Do you follow the environmental motto of reduce, reuse, recycle? Would you also like to help someone in Sierra Leone, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Uganda, Ghana or Moldova experience that thrill of personal freedom that your first bike gave you? It's easy. Just recycle bicycles.

One of the great things about bicycling through upscale neighborhoods is the amazing treasures you find in the trash. Some people have more money than time, so it seems perfectly reasonable for them to put expensive, usable items out with the trash. Over the past few years, we have diverted several nice pieces of furniture, a perfectly usable set of bicycle rollers and a rowing ergometer from the landfill. We have also saved many bikes.

There are many different reasons why perfectly serviceable bikes end up at the curb. Maybe the bike needed a small adjustment or a flat repair, or maybe it got displaced by a new bike. Maybe its rider grew up and moved away. What doesn't vary is that one person's trash remains another's treasure.

To reduce the number of bicycles going to landfills, I rescue them from the trash. After six months, the rescued bicycles start to clutter my garage. Once I have four to six of them, a carload, I donate them to the charity Pedals for Progress.

Pedals for Progress teams up with local volunteer groups who are trained to arrange, publicize and staff a collection day. The volunteers partially disassemble the bikes for shipping (remove pedals and turn handlebars), and provide transport back to Pedals for Progress' home location in High Bridge, New Jersey. Pedals for Progress evaluates the bicycles and fixes minor problems. The bikes are cleaned up, lubed and reshod with new tubes and tires as needed. Some are converted to a single speed. Then the bikes are held for the next ocean container shipment. To date, Pedals for Progress has shipped over 117,892 bikes to 32 countries.

The bicycles, after their ocean voyage, are delivered to a local receiver organization that reassembles the bikes and may modify them further, as needed. They are then resold into the local market, which may only have had access to prohibitively expensive, new imported bicycles.



Geoff Thomas rescues bikes he finds in the trash and donates them to Pedals for Progress, where they are fixed up and shipped overseas to developing countries. The bikes pictured above are on their way to the Morristown, N.J. collection site.



Do you remember how liberating your bicycle was to you as a kid? In many areas of the world, a simple bicycle provides that kind of freedom to adults. Suddenly, the person who could previously only travel on foot can now find work in neighboring villages and towns, start a small business or travel to see family or friends in areas where no public transit exists. In short, a bicycle can transform a person's life.

The Bike Collector

Over the past few years, I've collected quite a menagerie of makes and styles. Sometimes there seems to be a theme to a particular collection. I titled my most recent donation "A Salute to American Bicycles," complete with a Columbia from Massachusetts, the ever-present Schwinn from Illinois and a nice 24-inch girl's Ross from Allentown, Pa. I don't know where the Sears brand bike was made but it did say, Made in USA. The only foreign made bikes in the group were a Mongoose that looked brand new except for an out-of-true rear wheel and a vintage Fuji. Sometimes you can trace the date a bike

was sold by the bike shop stickers. Some bikes have stickers showing what college its owner attended. Oh, the tales these bikes tell. They can even reveal the stock history of local bike shops; some sold all sorts of brands that they no longer carry. It's also fun to see the evolution of bikes, from antique 3-speed Sturmey-Archer hubs to very current Shimano gear. I have been able to see firsthand how the craftsmanship of bikes has changed, how they have gotten lighter and more durable. I'm still hoping to rescue something equipped with Campagnolo!

The most common curbside find is usually a five to 20-year-old road bike, typically with a thick coating of garage dust, two flat tires and a very rusty chain. But then there are the nice older Trek mountain bikes that need only a new tube or the Dutch lady's multispeed city bike complete with fenders, internal drum brakes and generators. Judging from its size, Dutch women must be mighty tall! Kid's bikes and BMX bikes, recently, are increasingly common too.

What Does Pedals for Progress Want?

Pedals for Progress would like nearly all bicycles. According to David Schweidenback, president of

Pedals for Progress, “No bicycle is too good to ship overseas.” He notes that bicycle racing has taken off in the developing world; and as a result, demand is rising for high-end bicycles. Better quality bikes sell for higher prices in the destination countries, which helps to pay the shipping bills. Pedals for Progress ships high-end racing bikes regularly. I learned from Schweidenback that, “For years, the national champion of Nicaragua rode a recycled Cannondale!” While Pedals for Progress can use just about any sort of bicycle, the best find is a sturdy adult-sized mountain bike. The frames are strong, and the fat tires are well suited for poorly paved roads and rural paths. Pedals for Progress prefers men’s bikes because as Schweidenback says, “The bar that differentiates a man’s from a woman’s bike is, potentially, a seat. These bicycles

become the family vehicle. Every possible seat is needed.” However, a kid’s bike is also desirable abroad — bikes with 20 or 24 inch wheels are viewed as full size, and BMX bikes are especially sought after.

The bottom line is this. Whenever I see a bike put out with the trash, I look it over. If it is durable and fixable, I sling it into the car. If I see a good bike in the trash while I’m walking the dog, I’ll walk the bike and the dog home together. That bike then joins the herd in my garage until the next collection day. ●



The reborn bikes pictured above are now in service in Nicaragua.
Photo credit: David Schweidenback

For further information and details, please visit Pedals for Progress at www.p4p.org. While donations of bicycles or money are tax-deductible, bike donors must pay a minimum \$10 fee per bike to offset handling costs, which averages \$35 per bicycle. If you can’t find a collection site close to you, consider holding a drive of your own. It’s a nice Eagle Scout project, town environmental day project or a great activity for a bike club!

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