

Once junked, recycled bikes travel far. His mission? Pushing pedals for the poor

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INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

HIGH BRIDGE, N.J. — Dave Schweidenback knows for sure that one man's trash can be someone else's treasure.

That's how, since 1991, he ended up with the 9,000 old bikes that he has fixed up and sent to Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa.

Operating out of the basement of his modest home here, Schweidenback is a middle man between bikes gathering dust in garages across the country and the working poor in nations where a bicycle can mean the difference between poverty and economic survival.

"It's just the right thing to do with an old bike," says Schweidenback, 43, who is president of Pedals for Progress, a nonprofit charity he formed.

And so Schweidenback is always on the lookout for old bicycles — everything from those odd-looking banana-seat bikes with the long handle bars to those sturdy, quick-moving 10- and 20-speed Schwinn.

He goes to churches, schools, civic organizations and corporations, ready to relieve people of old two-wheelers. Last month, he went to the Main Line Unitarian Church in Devon and picked up 82 bikes. Last Saturday, he set a record by picking up 220 bikes in three hours at the Delcastle Technical High School in Wilmington. Next month, Pedals for Progress will be represented at locations in North Jersey, Virginia and Washington.

The organization also is getting some help from East Ward Elementary School in Downingtown, where teacher Jeff Singleton gets students to help collect bicycles and prepare them for shipment for Pedals for Progress.

"They love it," Singleton said. "Kids are interested in these far-away places."

As of the beginning of May, Schweidenback said, a total of 8,928 bikes had been shipped to Barbados, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Fiji, Haiti, Madagascar, Mozambique, New Guinea, Peru, Nicaragua and the newly emancipated country of Eritrea on the Ethiopian border.

Last week another 405 bikes were shipped to Barbados.

"We can do some neat stuff if you give us your junk," Schweidenback said.

Nearly half of his bikes have ended up in Nicaragua, including more than 2,000 to Rivas, a small agricultural town near the Costa Rican border where 60 percent of households now have a bicycle.

"The container of 400 bikes is gone in less than two weeks — poof — and the people are waiting for the next one," said Schweidenback, who found a local mechanic to run

a bike shop there and keep the bicycles up and running.

Schweidenback learned the value of the bicycle as a Peace Corps volunteer between 1977 and 1980 in Ecuador, where his landlord, a carpenter, was one of the most successful men in town because he could hang tools on his black one-speed bike and pedal all over — five days a week.

"It was the only bike in the entire state," he recalled.

Years later, Schweidenback, a former teacher, got the idea for Pedals for Progress when he was working as a contractor and playing "Mr. Mom" at home while his wife commuted to Manhattan. It came to him, he said, one day when he noticed a man unload a dozen bikes for dis-



For The Inquirer / MICHAEL PLUNKET

As president of Pedals for Progress in Raritan Township, Dave Schweidenback helps collect and send old bikes to poor nations.

posal at a transfer station here.

"If all it needs is new tires, it's a shame to recycle it when we can reuse it," Schweidenback said.

He started out envisioning a place for just those 12 bikes but ended up with a much broader agenda.

"It just got out of hand," says Schweidenback.

He says he receives a \$35,000-per-year salary, set by the organization's board of trustees, that comes from donations from corporations, churches and individuals. Pedals for Progress is now operating with about 100 volunteers, he said, in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, New York and Colorado.

And bikes are clearly the vehicle of choice in Schweidenback's life.

They hang in his garage, sit under his garage and in a storage facility near Flemington, where the bikes are sorted and then packed in containers for shipment. Bikes with flats are OK, he says, but he hesitates to take bikes that are heavily rusted.

Glancing at a pink banana-seat bike with 20-inch wheels — one that probably sat for years in some garage or basement — Schweidenback says that particular model is the bike of choice for many Nicaraguan women, who can easily transport two or three children on the vehicle.

"That's good for another 40 years," he says of the small bike.

Along with the bicycles, Schwei-

denback sends bike parts, too, figuring that a bike will last only if it's kept in good repair, and what better way to help a local economy than by providing a way for a local mechanic to get more work.

Schweidenback says the bikes are sent to an existing charitable, government or community organization already doing projects, and that group then charges about \$5 or \$10 per bike, usually enough to cover the shipping costs.

Many of the buyers, he said, are so poor that they can't even afford that, so the customer will often get a bike in return for a few hours of labor for that local organization, which might be constructing water lines or an infant-feeding center.

He says Pedals for Progress monitors the places where the bikes are sent to make sure that the vehicles are properly distributed, and will cut off a group if anything is amiss.

Schweidenback says he is always looking for the village at the end of a road because that's where he can find folks who now spend hours a day walking to and from their jobs.

"It's a wonderful feeling to be in a position to really be able to help some people," he said.

For More Information

■ Those interested in donating a bike to Pedals for Progress can call 908-638-4811.