

COMMUNITY RELEASE PROGRAM: THE FREEWHEELS BICYCLE DEFENSE FUND

It's the last Friday of the month: July 29, 2005. We make our way through the summer dusk to Manhattan's 7th Precinct on Pitt St., on the Lower East Side, and settle ourselves on the front steps with a sigh.

Inside, we know, are thirty-odd people who have been arrested by the police for largely imaginary crimes committed while riding their bikes during Manhattan's Critical Mass.

If the police were looking for "parading without a permit," they've certainly got it now, complete with a marching band.

We're here because we too know what it's like to be pulled from our bicycles and handcuffed. We've been bewildered by the cops' use of "terrorism prevention" equipment—from orange netting to helicopters—to hunt us down. We were just riding our bikes. But tonight we are at the precinct voluntarily, as members of FreeWheels Bicycle Defense Fund, and we're here to fight back.

We prepare to meet the arrestees when they are released. Blue sends me off to get food and drinks after unloading all of our paperwork from his bicycle trailer. We have fliers for the stunned arrestees, so they know where to call to get their questions answered. We will also offer them legal "scholarships" to cover the cost of defending themselves against the absurd charge of "parading without a permit." Dan is there to notarize forms that will allow Gideon, our lawyer ally, to advocate for the release of confiscated bicycles. We even have a fleet of bicycles (bought dirt cheap at police auctions) for arrestees to use while their own bikes are in police custody. We call our loaner bike program "Steal it Back."

With so many bicyclists relaxing on the sidewalk, our mood becomes increasingly festive. We know we will all be on these steps until very late; indeed, it will be nearly dawn when the last bedraggled arrestee is released. In the meantime, we have created a sort of autonomous zone on the steps of the precinct, where we laugh and talk, and even engage in friendly debate with a few curious police officers. Party at Precinct Seven.

Meanwhile, a few blocks away, another celebration is in full swing: the Critical Mass after-party at ABC No Rio on Rivington Street. Hundreds of people are dancing to the music of the Rude Mechanical Orchestra, a radical marching band with lots of attitude and FreeWheeler Rebecca as a baton twirler. This presents an interesting possibility. "I'll be right back," I tell the jail support volunteers with a smile.

I make my way to the party, where Rebecca's face lights up in a devilish grin as I explain my idea. She rounds up her bandmates, who agree that it sounds like marvelous fun. The band gets into formation, and we start down the street toward the precinct.

If the police had wanted parading without a permit, they've certainly got it now, complete with a marching band. But they have completed their evening's assignment of chasing down bicyclists, and are in no hurry to prolong their shifts by making more arrests. So we march around the station house, dancing and laughing. The Rude Mechanical Orchestra plays loudly enough that we are certain the cyclists waiting inside can hear the concert we are putting on for them.

Later, we will ride again, but for now we dance.

Gwen Kash is a founding member of the FreeWheels Bicycle Defense Fund (www.bicycledefensefund.org). Since February 2005, the Defense Fund has assisted bicyclists who are arrested, ticketed, or harassed by the City of New York.