

FLYING FREE

Around the corner,
Under a tree,
There's my bicycle,
Waiting for me.

Unlock the lock,
On the seat at last,
Push those pedals,
I've got to go fast!

Push, push on the pedals,
Pull, pull on the bar,
Don't stop now,
I've got to go far.

Up that hill,
I'm tired as can be,
Down that hill,
Flying and free.

Around the corner,
Under a tree,
I lock up my bike,
To wait for me.

*Natalya Brill, age 10,
learned how to ride a bike
when she was three. She
bikes to school nearly
every day through Central
Park, and enjoys it not only
for the exercise but for the
fun as well.*

NOT JUST KID STUFF

First I was a student. I spent the summer of 2003 learning all I could from bike mechanics who gave free Thursday night workshops at Recycle-A-Bicycle's DUMBO shop. That summer, I built a bike for the first time. I still ride it.

At first, I thought I was just building a bike. But actually I was coasting into the NYC bike community. At summer's end, I volunteered to work as a mechanic at Transportation Alternatives's NYC Century fundraising ride, where I fixed 20 flat tires on 20 different kinds of bikes. I got involved in Time's Up!, which offered its basement at 49 E. Houston St. as a bike workshop. With RAB director Karen Overton's sage advice, and the help of countless volunteers, I helped get the bike repair workshops going there too. They are now flourishing.

Watching the ripple effect of teaching bike mechanics is the most rewarding part of the job. When I show someone how to re-pack a bottom bracket, it's likely they will teach it to someone else. Almost every volunteer in the Time's Up! workshop started as a student, just like me.

"Technological know-how, and the sharing of information, creates new circuits of knowing, of trusting, of social verification, and finally and most importantly, of self-confidence," writes longtime bike activist Chris Carlsson. No one can contain the joy of repairing bikes—a student proud of her new skills is a natural teacher.

When Recycle-A-Bicycle hired me to work at its School for the Urban Environment in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in the fall of 2006, I knew my fate had come full circle. Every morning before school, I run an earn-a-bike program for sixth- and seventh-graders. To the kids, the program is a means to an end: Each student aims to earn, in shop hours, a bike that he or she eventually can ride home and keep. The process, though, will outlast the bikes they earn in my classroom. Long after they outgrow these bikes, they will have the skills to build other bikes, and, if my experience is any guide, greater confidence in taking on other challenges in life.

I can't speak for the kids, of course, but the way I see it they are now part of a larger community, too. They are rejecting the idea of relying on other people to "fix it" for them. They are taking active control over their environment, picking up tools to build a better world.

In at least one way, these middle schoolers have something in common with the urban environmentalists I have met at Recycle-A-Bicycle, TA and Time's Up!: They love learning new skills. Their joy, too, is hard to contain—it spreads from student to student. Some of these students become teachers and learn as much from one another as they do from me. There will always be times when frustrated kids want me to just fix it for them: That is the hardest part of teaching mechanics, resisting the urge to turn the wrench myself. Karen's rule at RAB volunteer nights was never to take a tool out of someone's hand.

As much as I love fixing bikes myself, my ideal class is one in which I'd never take my hands out of my pockets. That is when I'd know that the kids were learning with their own hands.

Rich Krollman is an organizer. He has been involved in the NYC bicycling community for four years, ever since he built his bike from recycled parts at Recycle-A-Bicycle.

Editor's Note: Drawings by Recycle-A-Bicycle students appear on pages 60–61.