

“Freewheeling” helps build multiple skills



Stephan Marcoux with two Freewheeling visitors. He is highly invested in this project, and said he hoped to continue it for many years to come

Stephan Marcoux had no hesitations when it came to get involved with the non-profit project Freewheeling. The project, which centers around repairing and refurbishing bicycles, is designed to help socialize and teach skills to young adults who are on the autism spectrum.

“We get kids to move,” Marcoux said, adding that, “A lot of our bikes are given back to schools.” Involved from the start, Marcoux said that the non-profit has been able to reach a wide range of youth in four different high schools by connecting with “high-risk” students.

The premise of the project is a genuine and simple one.

“With us, they get a chance to do something really cool socially,” Marcoux said. “It’s all hands on socialization.”

Since its official startup earlier this year, Marcoux said that the organization has seen approximately 58 people a week. Participants work in teams of two, and cover everything from cleaning to disassembling and reassembling the bicycles.

Marcoux joined the project last year when Freewheeling founder and board member Michael Herman approached him about taking the lead in the hands-on project.

Marcoux said that Herman saw Freewheeling as a perfect fit for him based on his experience working as a recreational therapist for 24 years and riding as an elite cyclist.

"He said I would be the perfect guy," Marcoux said, adding, "I was in transition."

Since then, both Marcoux and Herman have been working hard to get their first year off the ground.

Marcoux commented that this is an idea that immediately had an impact on the community and surrounding areas.

"Right away, we knew it was going to be successful," he said. Now they are looking for ways to keep that success going, through government and foundation funding opportunities.

According to Marcoux, the organization will not be eligible to apply for any funding until 2017, after their first year of operation. As a result, Freewheeling is privately funded for now.

"Michael Herman is really, really generous," Marcoux said, adding he could not emphasize enough how crucial Herman was to the success of Freewheeling.

"It's tough the first year," Marcoux acknowledged about the issues of financing a non-profit.

Community support has been a big factor in the success of the program. "The bikes are donated by individuals," he explained.

After this first year, Freewheeling will be able to start applying for grants to continue the project. Marcoux said that he hopes to eventually open a bicycle shop as an extension of Freewheeling.

"Here in Cowansville, there's no bike shop," he said, stating he believed it would fill a need and be a great expansion of the program.

Any funding the organization does get, Marcoux hopes to put towards expanding since, right now, Freewheeling occupies roughly 2,500 square feet.

"We need more space," Marcoux said, adding that they also need more tools, and "If we expand, that means more employees."

These are only some of the things that Marcoux has thought about since the start of the project.

"I have many great ideas," he said. All these ideas are geared toward the betterment of the program, a program that Marcoux stressed was very important for the area because of the good it did for young adults on the autism spectrum, or who are at risk.

"Everybody knows somebody that's on the autistic spectrum," Marcoux commented. At Freewheeling, they are able to get comfortable in a new environment and hopefully learn some new skills. With further funding, he knows they could do so much more for the people who want to be a part of the project.

In the meantime, Marcoux said that they were always looking for fundraising opportunities.

"We would love to do more fundraisers in the coming months," he said. "We just need to get that wheel spinning."

With all the support the program has already received, bicycle wheels all over town are spinning, and Marcoux intends to keep them that way.

"I believe in this program," he said. "It's such a beautiful, touching project."

For more information about Freewheeling and how to contribute, visit

<http://www.pleinsrayons.ca/>