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Berkeley shop adapts bikes for any disability

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(11-26) 19:41 PST -- Cast your memory back to the age of 5 or 6, when your adult helper let go and you wobbled off on your first solo bicycle ride.

What was that incredible feeling?

Freedom.

But what if that freedom was never available to you?

A woman named Meida recently contacted the Adaptive Cycling Center at Berkeley's Aquatic Park. The weathered wooden building is known to regulars as the **BORP** bike house, as in the Bay Area Outreach & Recreation Program. Meida explained that she was born without arms and wanted to ride a bike. She had ridden tandem but hoped to ride alone. She dreamed of someday riding across the Golden Gate Bridge.

The problem: Cycles are factory-made for people with a wide variety of physical disabilities, but there is no solo bike made for a person with no use of her arms.

The problem with that problem: Greg Milano, **BORP** director of cycling and the man who dreamed up the concept of the Adaptive Cycling Center, doesn't see problems as problems.

Milano and Martin Greiner, one of the bike house's 30 or so regular volunteers, went to work. They pondered, pattered and pounded, and pieced together a three-wheeled bike on which the rider performs all functions - pedaling, braking, turning, gear-shifting - with her legs.

Meida came to the Cycling Center and rode off down the trail with friends. Alone. Free.

The bike house is unique. There are other adaptive cycling centers in the country, but very few offer the element of independent-use, drop-in riding, as opposed to organized and scheduled group activities. And probably no other such center has a variety of bikes equal to the bike house fleet.

Trooper Johnson, a Bay Area wheelchair basketball superstar and a bike house regular, said with a laugh, "You can be a hemiplegic dwarf with one arm and blind in one eye, and Greg will build a bike for you."

Adapted for almost anyone

What they have developed at the bike house is a community of athletes, from kids to elderly riders to casual riders to hardcore Paralympians.

All are drawn to the barnlike, once-abandoned building about the size of a two-car garage that is packed solid with a crazy array of bikes. New riders receive instruction and safety training and are fitted onto a bike.

"We've been able to make a bike work for pretty much everyone who could make a rotating motion of some sort with at least one leg or one arm," Milano said. "We're working on bikes that are propelled by a push-pull motion."

The riders head out, alone or in groups, and burn up the Aquatic Park's 30 miles of trails, returning their bikes when they're done. If this was only about exercise, gym equipment and stationary bikes would work. But stationary bikes are stationary.

"My claim to fame is that I've seen 11 or 12 snakes," Jenny Kern said. "You see a lot of hawks. In a power (wheelchair), you can't sneak up on anything."

Kern had a spinal cord injury 20 years ago and didn't ride a bike until she found the Cycling Center. She rides every day the bike house is open. The attraction: "Cycling is so wonderful and so ordinary."

Kim Juarez is a water-skier, snow-skier and rock-climber, but much prefers cycling.

"Those sports are fun," Juarez said, "but they didn't give me the sense of freedom and joy I get from cycling. And it's great being able to outrun my dog, Mia. I always felt guilty that I wasn't giving her enough exercise."

All about fun

Take a casual ride with a group of the athletes and you can feel the freedom. Everyone's got a different story, but they all wind up on the trails, having fun.

Cheri Blauwet, a Stanford med school student, lost the use of her legs in a farm accident at the age of 1, in Iowa. For years she was the only kid she ever saw in a wheelchair, then she discovered wheelchair sports. She competed in college athletics and was a member of the U.S. team at the last three Paralympics, in wheelchair distance racing.

Blauwet, who has won the New York and Boston marathons, says cycling is better for her body than chair racing. She rides her own hand-crank bike, Blue Lightning.

"There are social barriers at health clubs," Blauwet said. "It's such a confining feeling. You're always a minority, not in a negative way, but you're a little different. It's comforting to come to a place with people who totally get you. We can share horror stories, share success stories."

Ride with family, friends

And share the rides with family members. Jenny Kern rides with her 4-year-old son and said, "He can see me being an athlete."

Arthur Renowitzky, 21, is paralyzed from the chest down since being shot three times in a random robbery outside a nightclub on Market Street one year ago. He had been an active athlete, and he sank into depression.

"I didn't even think about doing anything," Renowitzky said. "When you can't even get up to feed yourself, you start feeling sorry for yourself."

But he got into **BORP's** wheelchair basketball program, then learned of the Cycling Center, and now he's a regular. Often he rides alongside his longtime girlfriend, Tayler Osorio. Renowitzky is starting a foundation, Life Goes On, aimed at educating kids about violence and disabilities.

At the bike house, nobody is not having fun. Alli Szutu, an employee who works with the bikes and riders, found the job on Craigslist and fell in love with the place.

"It's amazing," said the Cal grad student and former gymnast. "It's really quality people, they're always upbeat, they come ready to ride. The first time someone gets on a bike, it's really amazing to watch. We have Saturday youth rides. The other day we put a boy on a foot cycle for the first time. It goes three times faster than the bike he was used to. He got so excited."

Opportunity for everyone

Milano, the Cycling Center director, does not have a physical disability. He lives on a small sailboat at a nearby marina, at a wheelchair-accessible dock so his friends can visit. His agenda is simple.

"I do this work," he said, "because I want everyone in our community to have the opportunity and the ability to participate fully in our society. I believe that makes the world a better place for all of us."

Milano recently received a snapshot from Meida, the woman with no arms. In the photo, she was riding her no-hands cycle across the Golden Gate Bridge.

For more pictures and a video of riders on hand-crank bikes at Berkeley's Aquatic Park, go to *sfgate.com*.

They'll take you for a ride

BORP in brief

-- Bay Area Outreach & Recreation Program (**BORP**) is a Berkeley nonprofit founded in 1976 by people with disabilities.

-- The Adaptive Cycling Center opened in April 2007, at Berkeley's Aquatic Park.

Join in

-- The Cycling Center is open from March through November on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Organized youth rides are held on Saturdays.

-- The Center has reduced hours in December, and is closed in January and February.

-- Call (510) 849-4663 (extension 306), go to ***borp.org*** or write ***cycling@borp.org***.

More to come

-- **BORP**, in collaboration with Waterside Workshops, has been awarded a \$200,000 grant by the Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council. The planned improvements include expanding the Cycling Center and creating canoeing, rowing and other adaptive water-sports facilities