

Disk: BikeEd II
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August 10, 1988

"WHEELS," A PILOT BICYCLE EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN

In spite of its high percentage of city cyclists, New York City deserves perhaps the lowest marks in the country for effort in bicycle education. According to Section 107.1, amended in 1973 "pursuant to" Section 806 of the New York State Education Law:

"Instruction in safety education, including highway and traffic safety, and bicycle safety (highlighted in italics!), shall be given to all pupils in both elementary and secondary grades; such instruction shall be made a definite part of the school program either as a special subject or in connection with instruction in other subjects; comprehensive plans for safety education shall be organized by local school authorities including highway and traffic safety, bicycle safety (again in italics!)..."

and other kinds of safety, too many to list here. The Section concludes by specifying a considerable number of class periods that must be devoted to safety education at each grade level. What portion of this time should be given to bicycle education and just what should be taught are left open.

Safety instruction in New York City schools is generally conducted through talks by members of the Police Department in an assembly or classroom situation. Given the antipathy that NYC police officers often feel for city cyclists and the fact that the NYC Police Department has refused to use bicycles in any capacity, it is likely that the bicycle portion of their safety instruction is seriously defective, probably as cursory as the section called "Bicyclists" in the New York State Department of

Motor Vehicles' Drivers' Manual, and probably lacking relevance to the particular problems of New York City's traffic. I doubt, for instance, that any school in this city gives time to on-bike, or at least simulated on-bike, training. Yet model programs exist in Miami, Los Angeles, and many other cities ready for adaptation.

On their own, concerned New York cyclists are trying to correct this neglect in New York's safety education efforts. Roger Herz, director of Bicycle Transportation Action and member of T.A., has persistently urged the State Government to enforce the 1973 law. Errol Toran, a chiropractor, bicycle racer and member of T.A., has started an original program under the aegis of the U.S. Cycling Federation. He has been allotted park time and roads for High School teams to compete on Saturday mornings in bicycle racing events that include bicycle safety instruction both before and after the races. While the racers are competing, their younger siblings and friends are invited to participate in bicycle rodeos where they can show off their skills, learn safety rules, and acquire certificates.

This summer the Girl Scout Council of Greater New York gave me a chance to try out my own program designed for NYC children. Inserted as a central component of a day-camp schedule, my "Wheels" program ran for two weeks and was attended by eight girls. Their ages ranged from 7 to 14 years and their ethnic and social backgrounds reflected the diversity of the city at large. They could all pedal a bike, but as far as controlled riding and reliable judgement were concerned, they were all beginners.

Even in a short time and in spite of the diversity within

the group, I was able to try out most of the activities that I hoped would be fun as well as instructive and that I hoped would inspire the girls to think of bicycles as vehicles, even though they themselves did not own bicycles or have much occasion to use them.

I scheduled twice-weekly sessions of on-bike training based on bicycle rodeo routines and in preparation for a rodeo of our own. These sessions were held in the basketball practice court of the Asphalt Green/Murphy Center at 90th Street and York Avenue. One afternoon was spent on Randall's Island where the girls had a chance to learn downhill control and where they could ride freely on the island's smooth and open roads.

Off-bike activities included listening to speakers and a variety of mini-classes. A director of the "Meals-on-Wheels" project explained the use of special vans to deliver meals to house-bound people. Errol Toran gave a vividly illustrated talk on what accidents can do to the human body. A former bicycle repairman demonstrated how to patch a punctured tire. I introduced map reading and map making to the girls with exercises in reading a compass and in drawing grids.

We made three field trips: a visit to Roosevelt Island with its aerial tramway, a ride on the Staten Island Ferry and a visit to the NYC Department of Transportation Police Training Academy. There the staff presented an engaging afternoon of short films, talks by different officers and demonstrations. For each trip a different girl was chosen to chart our way and lead us safely by foot and public transportation. No one "jay"-walked!

The last session of the program was devoted to a show and a

party. Each girl performed in a five-challenge rodeo. The girls also staged a skit featuring bicycles and they chorused a "rap" that they composed about bicycle safety precautions. They presented and explained posters which they had made showing the activities of the program. Girl Scout bicycling badges were awarded to all the girls. They had attended the program faithfully and seemed generally pleased with the experience.

Before I was in touch with the Girl Scout Council, I had presented a more extensive program to the 19th Precinct Community Council in hopes that elements of it could be used by their Youth Council. The Council Board not only approved the program, but voted for a sum of money to be set aside for its implementation. I now hope that some version of this program can be implemented during the school year -- as soon as practice space, instructors and assistants can be found.

I am also exploring ways in which a bicycle education program could circulate from district to district. This system would make it easier for schools and community centers to include bicycle education in their activities rather than trying to teach it themselves without the staff and equipment for doing so effectively. Equipment (training bikes, rodeo properties, films, books, art supplies, etc.) can be transported in a van. By roving in this way, a few instructors and the same equipment can service many schools and community centers.

If you are interested in the details of the Girl Scout program, or have any suggestions, or would like to help as an instructor or assistant in future programs, please contact me, Mary Frances Dunham, 212-472-9491.

Early Start to Safety

Bicycle education, an important long-term tool for increasing use of and respect for bicycling, and specifically mandated for school curricula by a 1973 New York State law, is lagging badly in New York City. As in other bicycle issues, dedicated cyclists are bypassing slow-moving official channels and initiating their own efforts as possible prototypes for full-scale implementation.

Last summer, eight NYC girls aged 8-14 took part in a two-week bicycle education and urban awareness program called "WHEELS," created by T.A. member Mary Frances Dunham and offered through the Manhattan Girl Scouts Council. All the girls could ride a bike but were beginners in controlled riding and reliable judgment. By the end of the course, they were a lot more savvy in both riding technique and safety.

The girls participated in bicycle rodeos and other city travel activities at the Asphalt Green/Murphy Center basketball court at 90th Street and York Avenue for two hours a day. One afternoon the group moved to Randall's Island, where the girls learned downhill control and rode freely on open roads. Off-bike activities included a talk by Dr. Errol Toran on how accidents injure the human body, a tire patching demonstration by a bike repairman, and instruction in using a map and compass. On the final day the girls performed in a five-challenge rodeo, staged a skit featuring bicycles, chorused an original "rap" about bicycle safety, and presented posters recapping the program.

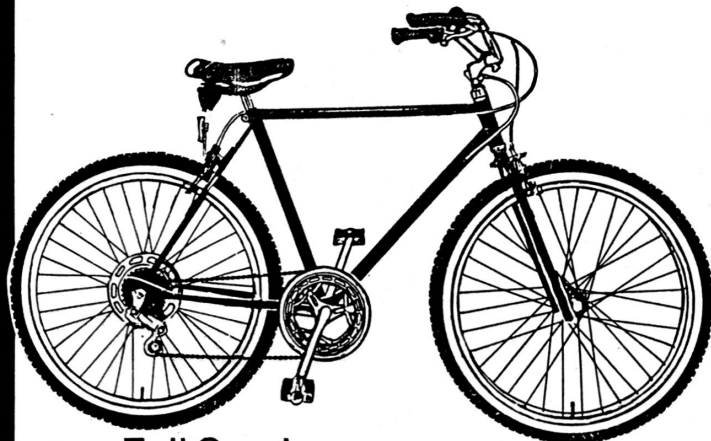
Although the 19th Precinct Community Council allocated funds for a bigger WHEELS program this summer, its future is uncertain because the Girl Scouts Council lacks adequate insurance. As an alternative, Dunham is exploring the idea of a roving bicycle education program, with training bikes, rodeo materials, films and art supplies transported by van to service many schools and community centers.

Interested people can contact Dunham at 212-472-9491.



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