

MENTOR SMOOTHS TEENS' ROUGH RIDE

In a small garage in West Dallas, DeMarcus Moore learned how to change a flat tire. He also learned how to talk to girls and cope with bullies.

At 15, he's considered an elder at the West Dallas Bicycle Co-op, where he joins about a dozen boys and girls each Wednesday night to memorize names of wrenches and scour rust off bike frames.

The class began in autumn with a promise that if students put in the hours, they'd ride away with bikes of their own.

Johnny Garippa runs vocational programs ranging from the bike shop to a gardening club at Mercy Street, a Christian non-profit in West Dallas. For the teens in the bike co-op, especially the boys, the 35-year-old is seen as an older brother, a male role model for some who don't know their dads.

They say he gives good advice on everything from school to siblings. But most of all, he's there to listen.

In a neighborhood that's home to many single-parent families with low incomes, Johnny would like to see the bike shop take hold and eventually be led by its students. Amid the wheels and gears and workbenches, he hopes bike skills might transfer into life skills.

"We're kind of in the business of dignity restoration," Johnny says. "The greatest kind of poverty is believing that you have nothing to offer," he says, loosely quoting Mother Teresa. The surprise, Johnny adds, is that he's learned as much as he's taught.

Johnny Garippa wears a scruffy beard and flannel shirts. He works with bike grease so often that it's more or less permanent under his fingernails.

One of seven children, he learned early how to work with his hands. His father was a pastor in Glendale, AZ, and stretching a pastor's salary meant gardening, fixing cars and a lot of doing-it-yourself.

DREAM JOB

Johnny got a bachelor's degree in international business in 1998 and scored a dream job for an avid kayaker and climber - working in product development for the North Face, a California-based maker of high-end outdoor gear.

But after four years, he grew disillusioned with tents and jackets that seemed to signal that nature came with a hefty price tag.

He quit and spent a summer bikeing along the coast near Santa Cruz, CA. He tried to decide what to do next.

Back in Arizona, he built swimming pools and spent free hours at a community center in South Phoenix, a poor part of town. The community center had a youth mentoring program and a shop called Barrio Bikes.

When he moved to Dallas for theology school in 2005, he found out about Mercy Street's work in West Dallas. The non-profit had been founded in 2003 as a mentoring program. He made a pitch: He wanted to turn a forgotten storage room full of broken mirrors, boxes and cobwebs into a community bike shop.

He would sign up kids to take classes in bike repair and allow them a chance to earn their own wheels. One day, they could even sell refurbished bikes as a small business.

"I was sold from the beginning," recalls Trey Hill, Mercy Street's executive director. "I was sold on Johnny as a person." He describes Johnny fondly, as a Christian hippie."

DeMarcus, the 15-year-old, carries himself with a quiet maturity - though he cracks a smile and talks in rapid bursts around friends.

He lived close to the bike shop when he was 11 or 12 and was curious about it. He'd hang around, silently watching.

At 13, he became one of the youngest members of Mercy Street's summer work crew and began repairing his first bike, a white BMX with blue stripes.

To Johnny's surprise, DeMarcus showed up on time each day. He completed the bike and earned the status of "junior leader", a coach for younger students in weekly bike classes.

Like most 15-year-olds, DeMarcus doesn't know what he'd like to be when he grows up. Perhaps he'll study the culinary arts. His signature dish - pasta Alfredo with shrimp sauteed in garlic - is a hit, even with his three younger siblings.

Or maybe he'll become an engineer. He'd like to learn more about what's inside a computer or the engine of a BMW.

But unlike many teen boys, he feels a deep loyalty to his neighborhood. He still considers West Dallas home, even though he lives with his mom and siblings in Irving now.

"If I become big and famous, I'll come back and help Mercy Street," he says. "I'll come back to my roots."

SETTING THE RULES

Building a bike is a great social equalizer, Johnny says. It doesn't matter where you come from, what pressures you have at school, what problems at home. The only way to prove yourself is with your own two hands.

"Here's how it's going to work," he tells his young charges on a chilly night in December. "One hour equals \$2. If you go to each class, that counts as two hours, and you can put in hours any time."

Bikes cost up to \$150. Do the math, he tells the kids.

The classroom breaks out in sighs.

"Oh, man." one student says.

"Really?" says another.

One kid stands up and pretends to walk out the door.

"You are in a program called Earn-a-Bike, not give a bike," Johnny says. "We're trying to get you to the point where you say, 'This bike is valuable. I put a lot of work into it.'"

Attendance fluctuates from week to week, but nearly 20 students crowd the room on one particular night: It's when the students pick the bikes to repair and refurbish, the ones they'll make their own.

DeMarcus picks a bright yellow Mongoose.

It's spring, and in the months that have passed, the bike shop has continued to gain popularity.

There's a waiting list of students for next fall. The co-op has started making its first sales. It holds a monthly bicycle bazaar to increase neighborhood awareness and to sell repaired bikes to help fund the shop.

After school, Johnny drives to pick up DeMarcus in Irving.

"They've taught me about the beauty of life," Johnny says of his students as he drives down Irving Boulevard.

"Getting to be side-by-side to them, developing a relationship with them. It's been about as honest as you can get."

Johnny rolls down the windows. DeMarcus and another boy hop in the truck.

They rumble down the road, talking about last night's class, how to keep the shop's troublemaker in line, when they'll hold their next group bike ride.

They pull into the driveway. A hand-painted sign marks the door of an old storage area, their new bike shop.

"Hey!" Johnny says. "We're home."

Inside, bikes-in-progress hang next to the names of their future owners.

DeMarcus spent weeks tinkering with and polishing his bike. The yellow Mongoose is shined up and ready for a ride - but it won't be his much longer.

At a sale, the bike catches a customer's eye, and she decided to buy it.

"It's cool," DeMarcus says later, with a shrug.

There will be other bikes, he says. He's glad that of all the bikes, she likes his.

Then, DeMarcus watches as, with his blessing, the Mongoose is wheeled away.