

Students at the Colorado Rocky Mountain School in Carbondale, Colo., wrench bikes for credit in their school-run bike shop.



High school kids bring bikes back to life

by Trina Ortega

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Nestled in a shady grove of cottonwood on the banks of the Crystal River in Carbondale, Colo., is a cottage-style building surrounded by grass and flower gardens. The swirling shush of the water and chirping finches greet visitors as they walk toward the quaint building.

This unlikely spot is home to the Colorado Rocky Mountain School (CRMS) Bike Shop, where high school students learn about and repair bikes for the school and the Carbondale community.

The private day and boarding school sits in the shadow of 13,000-foot Mount Sopris in the coal mining and ranching town that for decades was also a bedroom community for Aspen ski resort. Carbondale is now regarded for its eclectic mix of 6,000 residents who pride themselves on their unwavering commitment to alternative transportation, clean energy and outdoor recreation.

The school itself is a fine match

for the town. For its 150 students, the school combines college preparatory academics with community service and outdoor education. The bike program enrolls more than a dozen students each semester, equipping them with skills for the trail and road or teaching them about bike maintenance.

“The premise of the bike shop is to teach kids how to work on bikes and mechanical systems,” says Darryl Fuller, director of the overarching Outdoor Program. “For the kids who are passionate about biking, we’re providing them with skills for their whole life.”

The spokes of wheels hanging in a west-facing window inside the shop carve sunrays into triangles and diamonds like stained glass in a church. The bike shop is a sanctuary for the teenagers who don’t have the space or tools to work on their bikes and for teachers, as well, who are looking for a break from their lesson plans.

“It’s really exciting to be part of

this,” says Michael Hayes, bike program manager. “I like the combination of community service, for both the students and the faculty, and obviously the biking part of it.”

Throughout the year, the students repair bikes for fellow students and faculty. The bike shop is open four days a week, with students working two of them. In the spring, they fix donated bikes that are sold for cheap to the greater Carbondale community at the school’s annual spring bike swap.

“We don’t make any money. We focus on being able to provide inexpensive, reliable bicycles for folks to get around town,” Fuller says. “I think the kids enjoy the ‘project bikes,’ bringing them back to life, eventually getting them back out there for somebody to ride.”

Hayes is also proud to be part of a system that promotes biking as a lifestyle and provides “car independence” for Americans. “I don’t know if a lot of the students get what it provides. For me,

in terms of working on somebody else's bike, you don't know who the bike will go to, but you know it's going to provide transportation," he explains.

Freshman Alex Henderson, 15, gets it. He was in the bike program in spring 2009 and loved fixing up bikes.

"I'd never fixed up a bike before and within the last quarter of school I went from not knowing anything about bikes to making one work for somebody else. That was an awesome feeling," Henderson says.

Although he's ridden since he was little, Henderson would always rely on his dad to fix his flat tires. Now he can take apart an entire bike and put it back together. From brakes to derailleurs, working on bikes has given Henderson a set of skills he can use as he heads into a summer of mountain bike racing.

The program's curriculum includes riding technique and training tips, regular outings on the singletrack near town and trips to cycling destinations, such as the White Rim, Moab and Fruita. And the school usually has enough riders to race as a team.

Accident-prone sophomore Johnny Wilcox, 16, stops by the shop in late spring to do some general tuning on his Cannondale. The soft-spoken boy leans in to true his wheels, and his straight blonde locks fall across his eyes. He bears some bright strawberry patches along his right forearm and elbow. His hand is bandaged from a fall he'd taken "just messing around" on his bike on campus. On the walls around him are wrenches,



A Colorado Rocky Mountain School student does his homework in the school's bike shop.

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screwdrivers, compressors, trail maps, jerseys, racing bibs, banners and posters of biking deities.

Wilcox enrolled in the program in fall 2008 to learn about bike mechanics.

"There's always stuff wrong with my bike, 'cause I'm always crashing. But other people's bikes I've worked on run well," he says, listing the upgrades he's made to his mountain bike: changed out his V-brakes for disc brakes, removed the front ones altogether, replaced his rear and front derailleurs, put on a new stem, bars and grips and more.

His riding has improved tremendously because of the program, and he plans to race downhill this summer, so long as he stays healthy and

injury-free.

"I definitely know more than when I started," he says. "I love working on 'em but my favorite part is when you get to go riding, and you know that it's working well. You kinda gotta trust that you did a good job working on it so it'll get you down the mountain." 🌀

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