

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

## Assembling Christmas dreams, bolt by bolt —Kids and Bikes Foundation enables 650 needy children to receive new bikes

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Combining fun and charity comes naturally for Lou Ventura. In December of 2004, the Goleta native organized a tennis tournament at his home and invited a bunch of friends. Acting as line judge, the idea was for players to "bribe" him. The money was used to buy bicycles to give to underprivileged children for Christmas. He was able to purchase 68 bikes, which were given to Unity Shoppe for distribution.

The plan was hatched when Mr. Ventura went to the Unity Shoppe to donate toys. He didn't see any bicycles and was told that it was more cost effective to give families food instead. "Think about all the gifts you had as a child at Christmas time," he said. "The bicycle was 'it.' That represented freedom and independence. We want to be part of that memory and part of the community fabric that gives that dream to all the little kids who might not have the opportunity."

The tennis tournament concept didn't continue, but each year more friends got involved. In 2007, he realized that they should open it up to the community.

Having lived in the area all his life and with many connections made, both



Some of the 650 bikes that will be donated to Unity Shoppe and other organizations sit on the tennis court at the home of Lou Ventura, founder of the Kids and Bikes Foundation.

NIK BLASKOVICH / NEWS-PRESS



Lou Ventura, center holding the white helmet, along with volunteer kids, poses with the firefighters in front of a wall of helmets they donated.

personally and professionally, Mr. Ventura is well-suited to get people to open their checkbooks. Donations rolled in and the Kids and Bikes Foundation, as it came to be called, gave away 450 bikes.

In 2008 the foundation became a bona fide nonprofit organization, which made it possible for businesses to give tax-deductible donations. The day when all the bikes were assembled at Mr. Ventura's Rancho Embarcadero home was coined "Bikefest."

On Saturday, approximately 400 members of the community arrived over the course of the day to volunteer their services. Dozens of stations were set up all over the property with individuals and groups hard at work assembling the bikes. They started arriving at 5 a.m. and by mid-afternoon had completed all 650 bikes.

Earlier this year, Mr. Ventura flew to China with an associate to scout a bicycle factory with the best product combined with optimum labor conditions. He took out loans to purchase all the bikes and have them shipped home. They have been stored in giant containers provided by MarBorg Industries since July.

The retail cost of these bikes would amount to \$100,000. One volunteer commented that their quality is "100 percent better" than those from previous years.

Many of the smaller bikes were already assembled on Wednesday by Citrix employees, who earned their regular wages while performing the charity work. The Goleta-based corporation donated 135 helmets last year. This year the Santa Barbara city and county fire departments put their two charity funds together to purchase 500 helmets. Boone Printing & Graphics provided the stickers that were applied by students from Bishop Diego Garcia High School.

Tony Pighetti, an engineer with the city's fire department, played a major role in getting his fellow firemen on board and arranging for the helmets. "A lot of times you give money and don't know where it goes," he said. "This is a feel-good thing." About 20 members from the two fire departments volunteered throughout the day.

The Bishop Diego students all attend a class called "Leaders for Life," which focuses on offering services to the community. Twenty of the bikes will be donated through Project Santa -- a program the school runs every year. A dozen or so families are "adopted" and provided with a full Christmas experience. This was the school's second year participating in Bikefest.

The Police Activities League is another group that prepares kids to be leaders in the community. Twelve members were present from four different schools.

Alexis Tinajera, a 15-year old student at San Roque School, worked with two other teens. Her responsibility was installing brakes and reflectors. "I think it's very neat for us to make the bikes ourselves," she commented. "Maybe some of those kids won't get bikes, but now they'll be able to have the same experience I had."

Unlike most volunteers, members of PAL will be able to see 71 children receive their new bikes at an annual Christmas dinner on December 16 at Cabrillo Arts Pavilion.

Many of the volunteers, like Ms. Tinajera, had never assembled a bike before.

On the other side of the driveway, Jaime Espinosa and Otis Jones were starting to get in the groove on their first attempt. Mr. Espinosa formed an organization called Young Friends of Santa Barbara in June to provide kids with a productive outlet for their energy. They appeared focused in their work at neighboring stations. "People want to volunteer but they don't know how," he explained. Mr. Ventura spoke to the group recently and provided them with a boost of inspiration. "He started small and it turned into this," marveled Mr. Espinosa.

The next table over, four members of the Rotaract Club were finishing up their third bike. The organization is a junior version of the Rotary Club. President Tara Yeto recruited the members based on the positive experience she had at Bikefest '08. "I had a great time and learned to put a bike together," she said. "It's easy." New member Jessica Reader told the News-Press, "It feels great to make their day or year. This might be the only bike they ever get."

Following assembly, the bikes were taken to the quality control zone where they were examined by experts, and then the tires were filled with air. The finished products were moved onto the tennis court, which would overflow by day's end. They will be picked up over the next ten days by the various organizations responsible for their distribution. Among these charities are The Teddy Bear Cancer Foundation, Transition House, St. Vincent's, Devereux Foundation and Goleta Boys & Girls Club.

The Unity Shoppe still gets the majority of the bikes. It then allocates them through a meticulous screening process. Executive Director Tom Reed explained that they don't just give them to the needy, but to those who have room and can take care of them.

"We are selective," he said. "It's more of an art form than people think." He mentioned how nice it was to have larger bikes this year to cater to a wider age range.

Extra! Extra!, a female a cappella quartet from Ventura made its way around, serenading the volunteers with Christmas carols. Mark Orfalea, the owner of Freebirds in Isla Vista, donated enough burritos to feed 200 people.

"I'm kind of blown away by it all," he remarked. "You're giving back and at the same time it's a lot of fun."

Other than a desire to give, the one thing everyone seemed to have in common was a heartfelt respect for Mr. Ventura and his efforts. One pal, Jace Yoder, has seen things develop since the beginning.

"He's outgoing, he's friendly, and he's well known in the community. He brings in 90 percent of the money. Each year I see it becoming the entity he wants it to be."

Not surprisingly, Mr. Ventura wasn't inclined to take much of the credit.

"This is a testament to these people's spirit. If it wasn't for all of them, I would just be a guy with a good idea."

See [www.kidsnbikes.org](http://www.kidsnbikes.org) for more information.

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