

Hands-on program teaches youth how to build, ride bikes in West Phoenix

At [The Salvation Army Phoenix Maryvale Corps](#), the anticipation that builds during the six-week bike program might rival that of Christmas morning.

“The kids were just so excited,” said Corps Officer [Major Joseph Cisneros](#). “I talked to the parents the week before they took their bikes home, and... some of the kids could not sleep at night because they knew the next day, they were going to be able to get their own bike and ride their own bike.”



That’s, perhaps, the best part. The program teaches kids 7-18 how to build and [maintain bikes](#), how to ride them and key safety elements—like the rules of the road—all within a spiritual framework. At the end of the program, the participants get to keep the bikes they’ve built and receive a helmet too.

“The excitement was more than I expected,” Cisneros said, comparing it to The Salvation Army’s traditional bike giveaways for kids [during the holidays](#). “This one was not only a gift, but they actually built it with their own hands.”

The idea for the program began years ago, when the corps received a donation of bicycle parts. Cisneros started dreaming up a program for youth that would teach them how to build bicycles. Then, the pandemic happened, and the idea lay dormant while The Salvation Army [shifted priorities](#).

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Kristen Roof, Phoenix Advisory Board Member

When life began to return to the “new normal,” so did the idea for a bike program.

Finally, with support from members of the Phoenix Advisory Board and the community, the program held its debut session with a group of teenage boys—a mix of children from the corps and the community who had learned about the program through social media, word of mouth or postings at the food pantry. Since then, the cohorts have varied in age and gender.

“The kids were very happy learning,” said Phoenix Advisory Board Member Andy Gutierrez, who volunteers with the program. “One of the reasons I like this is because these kids nowadays are on their devices and they’re not used to using tools...I thought it’d be nice to have a kid work with their hands, learn a little something and get away from their phone or their TV or their iPad or whatever else is taking up their time.”

The hands-on learning starts the first week with the basics—tools needed to build and repair the bike. Cisneros said they discuss topics like the differences between metric and standard measurements and fine and standard threads. The concept of “righty tighty, lefty loosey” also comes into play. Cisneros adds a spiritual component to every class.

“When I spoke about the tools, I talked about Noah...and how he built the ark,” he said. “If he had measured it wrong, it wouldn’t come out the way God wanted it, and he wouldn’t have floated.”

In the second week, the participants are measured to determine what size bike they need. Once bikes are purchased, they are put on the stands the program uses for assembly—lending to the spiritual concept of the frame, and how God put the universe in place.



Participants work on assembling their bikes. Courtesy Phoenix Maryvale Corps.

The third week focuses on putting on the tires, repairing the tire tube and the correct amount of tire pressure—understanding the concept of pounds per square inch. Cisneros talks to the kids about how it's necessary to have God to guide you in life just like air is needed in the tires.

By the fourth week, the bike takes shape. The kids get the handlebars in, the seat on and measure the seat height according to each child's size. By the fifth week, the bikes are fully assembled, with the tires and seats.

"What good is a bike without the seat? You can't sit on it," Cisneros said. "What good is it without handlebars, if you can't guide it? So God's going to be your guide."

The last week is when many kids learn how to ride a bike—something Phoenix Advisory Board Member Kristen Roof, who also volunteers with the program, said has been "the coolest thing."

"They just have been so excited to learn how," she said. "It's not only learning how to use the tools and maintain their bike, but we also have the ability to teach them the functional skill of bike riding."

During the first session, Cisneros said the teens who participated were too large for training wheels.

"We literally had to teach them, guiding them and carrying them, pushing them along," Cisneros said. "One kid was a lot bigger than we expected to be able to teach. He was 15 years old...and it took us a little bit of a balancing act to get him riding."



Courtesy Phoenix Maryvale Corps.

By the last class, Cisneros said they were able to push the teen along, and he rode across the corps parking lot.

One of the teens who participated in the program's first session wanted to return to help teach other kids and learn more about building his bike. For the second session, he was one of Cisneros' mentorees.

Gutierrez said all of the kids he's encountered through the program are "very grateful."

For him, one of the younger participants particularly stood out.

"We started on his bike first, and he so badly wanted to take it home, and he couldn't," Gutierrez said. "He cried, and we had to kind of pep him up...and every week he was really excited, wanting to take it home. And finally, he was able to do it, and that made my day."

Since the beginning of the program, some participants and their families have started coming to the corps for services.

"That is something that I feel like I will take with me forever—the ability to [stretch out beyond](#), to put a big hug around other people that we may not have reached yet through other programs," Roof said. "Getting to know the kids through the bike program that I didn't know through other programs was a really neat experience for me."

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