



Joy Ride

Cycles Help Disabled Feel Freedom on Wheels

Nearly 40 million Americans live with a disability. If Joe Tarver had his way, all 40 million would be on bicycles.

“People need exercise, and there’s no exception,” says Tarver a member of the Lubbock (Texas) Lions Club. That’s why for three decades and counting, he, his wife Nona, and their son Brad, have worked to provide accessible, customizable bikes to children and adults with permanent disabilities.

But the Tarvers haven’t done it alone. With them have worked numerous Lions, many of them from the Lubbock area, to help people with disabilities access the exercise, fresh air, and fun that provide so many benefits to mind and body. And it all began with one idea.

Tarver is the founder of New Ideas Development Inc., a company that guides new ventures to the market. About 30 years ago, he found himself holding the patent to a bicycle technology called front-wheel drive. Cycles with this technology are powered by moving the handlebar up and down with the hands, rather than pedaling with the feet. “We were putting it on two-wheeled bicycles,” he recalls. “It wasn’t really going anywhere.”

That is, until an acquaintance caught wind of the innovation and told Tarver about his young daughter, who had spina bifida. The girl’s legs were para-

lyzed— but she would be able to operate a front-wheel drive three-wheeled cycle, since it wouldn’t require her to balance. “So we welded up a three-



Kelsey Hart

Cycle for Life recipient Jerrod Meyers poses with Dan Pope, President of the Redbud Lions Club, which is the National sponsor of the Cycle for Life Project, Bryan Steward, manager of W.W. Grainger, Lubbock store which donated funds for several cycles, Marshall Cooper, Past International Director, and Joe Tarver, Cycle for Life coordinator.



wheeled bicycle, went down to the Walmart and bought some paint, spray-painted it real nice, and took it to her. It was a total success,” he says. “We didn’t think much about it.”

Then the phone started ringing. “We got calls saying, ‘We need something like that too,’” says Tarver. “So we built three more, and it just kept growing. Accidentally, really. Like a lot of good things.”

For example, if riders have low muscle tone, they can use a cycle that is powered by both hands and feet. If they don’t use their legs, they can use a front-wheel drive cycle. If they are blind, they can use a “centipede” model that connects to an additional bike, so they can ride tandem-style with a sighted person.

And if riders aren’t able to use their hands or feet, they can sit in a wheelchair that connects to a bicycle, so they can enjoy the movement and fresh air while someone else pedals. The cycles can be further customized with arm rests, lap and chest belts, baskets (to hold and oxygen tank, for example), and other options. Each cycle costs about \$1,500 to manufacture.

Past District Governor (2-A1) Alvin Owen of the San Angelo (Texas) Lions Club was immediately taken with Cycle for Life when he encountered some of its bikes on display at a Texas Lions State Convention. Right away he thought of San Angelo Lions Charities, a local 501 (c) (3) through which the town’s seven Lions clubs can donate funds for those in need.

And so, late last year, San Angelo Lions Charities purchased 80 cycles from Cycle for Life and began distributing

them to those in need. So far they have distributed about a quarter of the stock. “The only qualification is that users have a disability that prevents them from normal activity,” Owen says. “There’s no financing whatsoever. The individual could be a millionaire or a pauper; it doesn’t make any difference.”

The cycles are loaned to users on a long-term basis. That’s so that if “the person passes away, or their disability gets more serious so that they can no longer use the cycle, they can return it to us,” Owen explains. Until then, “we ask that they’ll keep the cycle secure and keep it out of the weather so that it doesn’t deteriorate.”

One of their first recipients was 40-year-old Jason Slawson of San Angelo, who is paralyzed from the waist down due to a roofing accident. When he first heard about the cycles, he wasn’t interested, assuming that they used the same clunky technology that he had encountered 20 years ago in his post-accident physical rehabilitation. But then he saw a front-wheel drive cycle and changed his mind. “I just couldn’t believe the difference,” he says. “It just seemed a lot cooler. As soon as I saw it, I couldn’t wait to get it.”

Slawson, a former college athlete who now owns a roofing company, uses his cycle to stay in shape. “It reminds me of a high school football workout,” he says. “I’m pretty physically fit for my condition, and just to the end of the street and back is a full workout. It’s the real deal, for sure.”

That’s music to Tarver’s ears. He’s not sure how many people have received a Cycle for Life cycle over the years, but

he knows it’s at least several thousand, and he’d like it to be many thousands more. Lions Clubs in Fort Worth, Abilene, Beaumont, Houston, and Vernon, Texas, plus others in Kansas City and Tulsa, are just some of the clubs working with Cycle for Life to get accessible cycles to those who can benefit. Cycle for Life even helps Lions Clubs research and submit funding requests to local foundations.

“Foundations love the project, because we can show them that every dollar they give is worth \$30 in physical therapy value,” Tarver says. That’s not even including the value of the joy and socialization that a cycle provides to, say, a child who used a wheelchair.

“With a child in a wheelchair, the other children will say hi to them, maybe, but they don’t want to play with them very much. But when they ride this cycle, every kid down the block comes to see what it is, and they’ve got new friends.”

And then there’s the value to the Lions themselves. Tarver says: “We have one Lion who’s getting up in age, and he says, ‘Remember when we gave that bike to that little kid?’ It sticks with him, just like when you put glasses on someone, and they can see well for the first time. When something like that happens, that’s when you really become a Lion.

Article by Anne Ford