

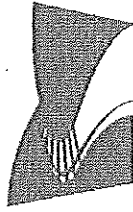
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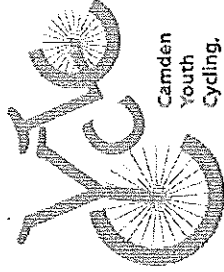
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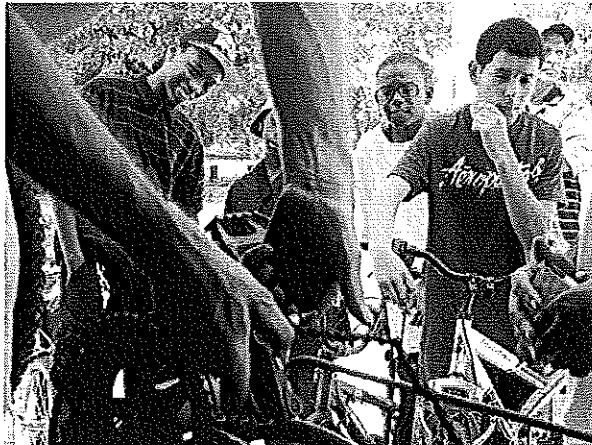
Camden
Youth
Cycling,
Learning &
Exercising

* LEARN ABOUT
THE CYCLE
SUMMER PROGRAM

Bringing a bicycle culture to Camden

May 30, 2012|By Edward Colimore and INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Wood demonstrates to a group of North Camden youths how to fix a bike chain.



Akram Abed of Camden wanted to make a difference after graduating from college.

He spent two years with the national service program AmeriCorps VISTA and was thinking about helping developing countries next when a realization hit him: His own city was struggling. Why not focus on home?

"There's a lot of work to do in Camden," said Abed, a naturalized Palestinian American who was born in Ramallah on the West Bank. "I wanted to be a problem solver."

He decided to start a bicycling program for the city's young people, to create a "bike culture" in a place that doesn't even have a bicycle shop. But where to begin?

With support from Camden County and the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a Washington nonprofit, Abed now helps run bike-repair clinics, will teach a cycle-safety and endurance-training course for 12-year-olds this summer, and volunteers for a county bike-share program that will make bicycles available to riders of any age for a small yearly fee.

"It'll be like a library book. You check it out for whatever period of time," said Abed, 25, an avid cyclist who lives in the city's Cramer Hill section. "We want to bring down the cost of bike acquisition for those who can't pay for one up-front."

Abed learned about the county bike-share program from Jack Sworaski, director of the Camden County Division of Environmental Affairs, who had collected about 225 bicycles at the county's

Health and Executive Campus at Lakeland, Gloucester Township. They were donated, or stolen property that was recovered by authorities and never reclaimed.

"Three towns have expressed an interest in the bike-share program," Sworaski said. "We'll establish distribution points, probably on municipal property."

The effort is modeled after a similar one in Collingswood, where residents pay \$20 a year to pick up bikes. An annual fee has not been set for the county program, which has not yet established a launch date.

"We are reaching out to Camden County municipalities to identify" distribution points, County Freeholder Jeffrey Nash said. "Many municipalities are along the Camden County Multi-Use Trail Network that provides riders with hundreds of miles of recreational opportunities.

"Bicycles are also needed for the program, both in working order or for use as parts," Nash added.

Volunteers are sought, too, said Sworaski, who enlisted Abed, one of about a dozen people repairing bikes on Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings at the Lakeland complex.

He also introduced Abed to Tom Sexton, director of the Northeast Regional Office of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, whose mission is to create a nationwide network of bike trails from former rail lines. The group has 150,000 members across the country, including 8,000 in Pennsylvania and 3,000 in New Jersey.

"Abed is working closely with me and has helped get us where we are," Sworaski said. "We are taking bikes that are unwanted and getting them to people who will give them a second life. This promotes bicycling for recreation, transportation, and exercise."

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has been a key player in the county's biking effort. With grant money from the William Penn Foundation and Campbell Soup in Camden, Sexton hired Abed to help organize "pop-up" bike shops in North Camden and lead the bike course for Camden Youth, running from July 9 to 29.

"One aspect of a vibrant city is that it's a place where people can walk and bicycle in a safe and convenient manner to school and work," Sexton said. "Surveys show that the No. 1 thing people want is highway access. But No. 2 is having trails for biking and walking."

The children in the bike course, dubbed CYCLE (Camden Youth Cycling, Learning, and Exercising) and costing \$95, will use new bikes during training, which will culminate with a ride to Trenton. Graduates will get to keep a helmet, reconditioned bike, and jersey.

Sixteen youths finished a similar program in 2010 and about a dozen completed one in 2011. This year, organizers hope to sign up as many as 30.

"We want kids to have good bike skills in the city," said Sexton of Camp Hill, Pa. "We start in town and move out to different places. As we mature, we will reach out to the Pine Barrens."

The YMCA is helping to register youths for the course even as work continues on the construction of a trail running along the riverfront to East Camden.

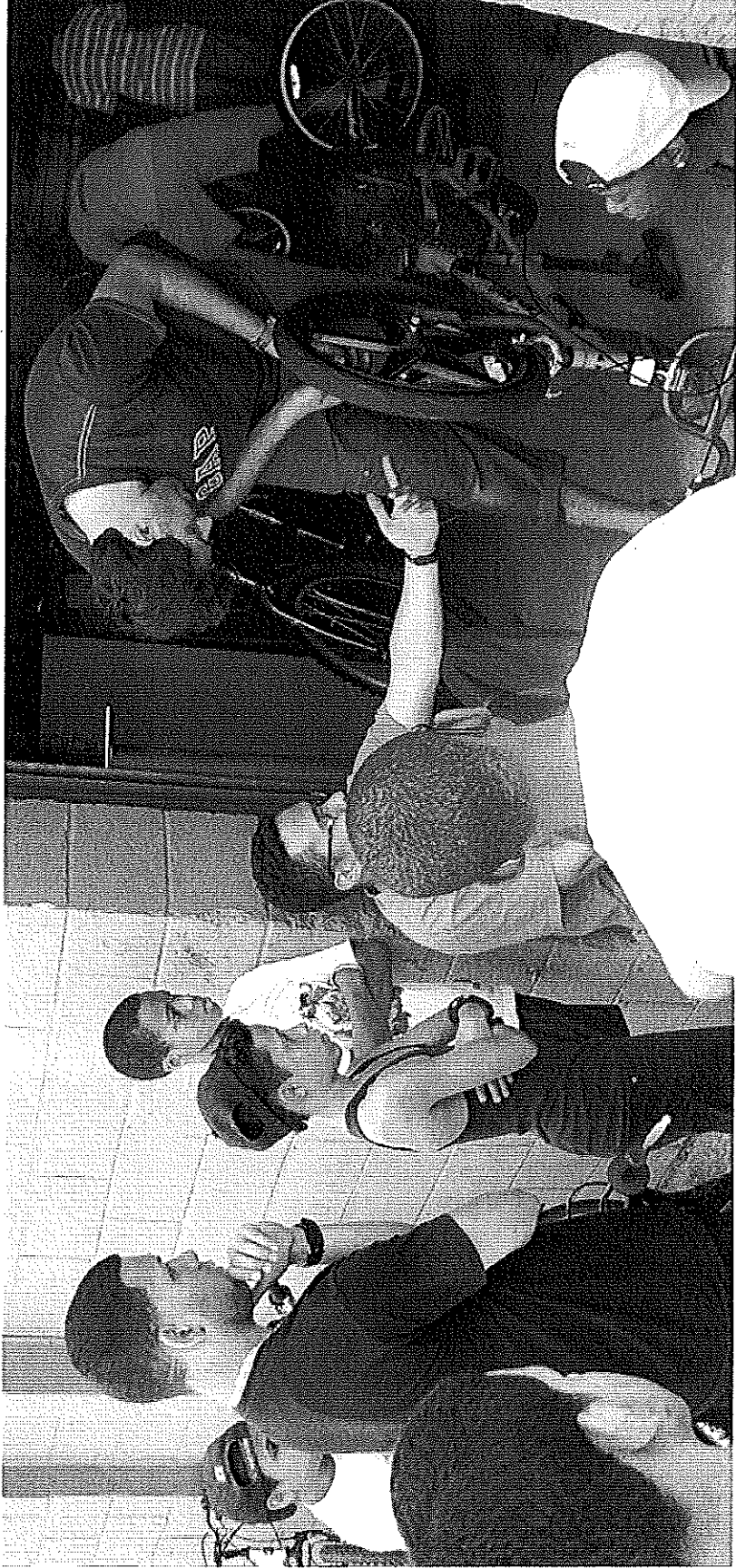
The next pop-up bike-repair shop, which is primarily for the city's youth, will be held from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on June 2 — National Trails Day — at Respond Inc., a nonprofit social-services agency, at Seventh and Erie Streets in North Camden. The Cherry Hill bike shop Danzeisen & Quigley has provided items at a discount and donated others.

"I had wanted to do something with high impact in developing nations, where any little help goes a long way," said Abed, who graduated from the Brimm Medical Arts High School in Camden and from Brown University in Providence, R.I., with a degree in international relations.

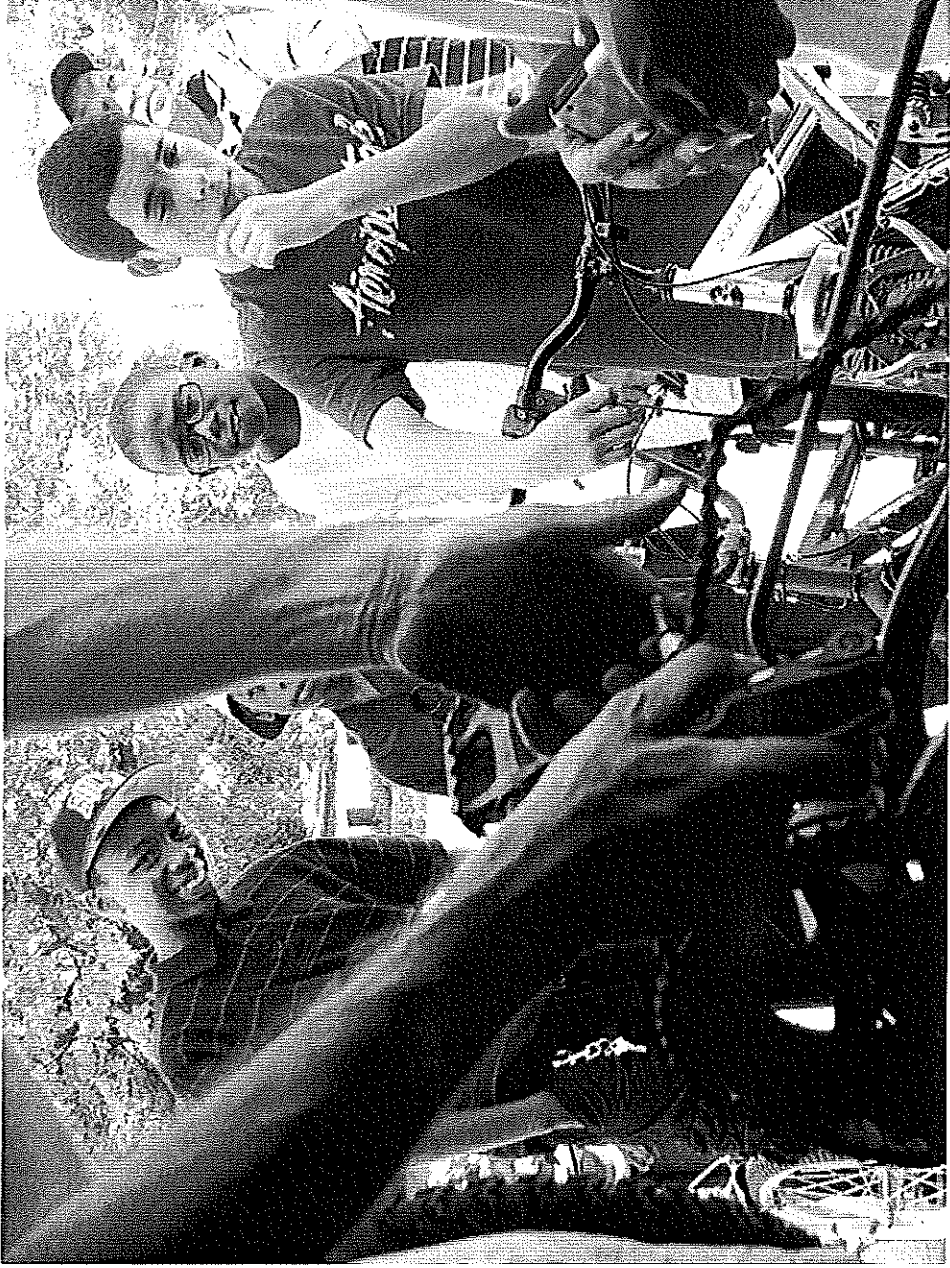
"I want to be the someone who solves problems, not just sees one, then does nothing about it," he said. "That's why I've stayed in Camden."

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Camden Pop-Up Bike Shop



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