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Magazine®



Mike Ricciardi
sees life through a
**FISH-EYE
LENS**

Bike Walk Indian River County's mission promotes a safe environment for walkers and cyclists of all ages.



PHILANTHROPY

The Wheel Deal

BIKE WALK INDIAN RIVER COUNTY IS A SMALL NONPROFIT PROVIDING A BIG SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

Do you remember your first bicycle? I do. It was the night before Christmas at my grandparents' house. Pop's "famous" Christmas Eve whiskey sour cocktails were stirring. Canapés and warm cookies served by Mamie, his spouse.

Brothers and cousins sprawled on the floor, unaware. That Uncle Mike, in disguise, occupied Santa's chair.

One present from Santa. Another from Mamie and Pop. With more than a dozen grandchildren, it was over the top.

Out in the carport, I checked out my new bike. No training wheels, no helmet, no parents in sight.

What could go wrong as I poked my head through the frame? I got stuck. Really stuck. I started shouting the names.

Of my parents, my uncles, my

aunts, and my cousins. Nobody heard me, although in the '70s, this wasn't uncommon.

I was scared and in trouble. Then a clank and a clatter. It was Pop, with a wrench, to handle the matter.

He freed me, chuckled, and let me in on the joke. "You're lucky," he said, "that I came out here for a smoke."

"Now go have some fun," Pop ordered before heading inside.

INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS



In July, the Indian River Community Foundation gave a grant to Bike Walk Indian River County to help fund the organization's mission.

Leaving me there all alone with my ride.

My first taste of freedom, all the places I'd go. A bike makes the world better. If you know, you know.

From the first time I met Bike Walk Indian River County founder Hugh Aaron, I knew he knew what I learned from that Christmas gift in 1978. A bike makes the world better. Together with Malcolm Allen, former owner of Orchid Island Bikes and Kayaks, and a growing coalition of community volunteers, Aaron established Bike Walk in 2015 with a mission to promote safe bicycling and walking as transportation and recreation.

"Over the years, our advo-

cacy, education, and outreach efforts have contributed to a healthier, more vibrant, and better-connected community," says Amy Banov, longtime volunteer and current president of the charity's board of directors. That's an understatement, considering the organization's numerous accomplishments in its first decade of service to the community. After 10 years, Banov and her team of dedicated volunteers and community partners are not coasting. To borrow a phrase from the world of auto racing, they are putting their pedals to the metal.

As advocates, Bike Walk volunteers work together with



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Volunteer Todd Hopkins fine tunes a bike for a client.

local and state government on road projects to address bicycles and pedestrians. This has resulted in wider and properly marked bike lanes, signs for motorists to accommodate bicyclists, new pedestrian crossings, and other safety initiatives. Bike Walk is also responsible for the installation and maintenance of public bike repair workstations throughout the county.

Education is another important part of Bike Walk's mission. The organization collaborates with the Metropolitan Planning Organization to host "bike rodeos" that ensure every fourth and fifth grader in our county's public schools learn basic bike skills and receive a free helmet. Students outside the public school system, along with their parents, are given the opportunity to take free bike safety courses online.

Bike Walk also teaches bike repair. Through a partnership with Youth Guidance Mentoring Academy, dozens of kids have completed a comprehen-

sive bike repair curriculum. Several of these young people have landed internships at local bike shops, putting their technical skills to work while also learning valuable life lessons such as organization, patience, and working with others.

"Bike Walk's bike repair program is especially meaningful for students who are struggling academically or who are not involved with more traditional extracurricular activities like sports, band, or theater," says Phil Barnes, executive director of Youth Guidance. "Fixing a flat tire or replacing a chain are not easy tasks, so giving these kids this opportunity helps to build their confidence."

As for outreach, the organization's Bike Rehab program is the most visible. This program relies on volunteer mechanics to repair donated bikes for people who need them the most. With almost half of Indian River County's population considered "transportation disadvantaged," the need



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INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS

for this program is tremendous.

“For most people, riding a bike is for recreation and exercise,” says Matthew Tanner, executive director at United Against Poverty. “For the people we serve, a bicycle is basic transportation.”

In addition to UP, Bike Walk partners with other local charities, including Camp Haven, the Veterans Council, and Hope for Families Center, to support the particular needs of their clients. Last year, Bike Walk was awarded a \$100,000 grant from Impact 100 to expand the reach of this important program. The organization has certainly come a long way.

To be honest, when I first

met Bike Walk’s founders to learn about what they had in mind for our community, I was skeptical. The new charity had a budget of less than \$10,000. It was operating out of borrowed space, and its main partner involved with identifying and qualifying eligible Bike Rehab recipients was going in a different direction and was not going to remain involved.

With little notice, they needed to raise about \$15,000 to pay for space where they could relocate operations, which included storage of more than 100 donated bikes waiting for either repair or distribution. They’d passed the hat. They’d gone to friends and family. They were coming



Bikes in various stages of completion are stored in Bike Walk’s facility.

up short. In other words, they were stuck.

Stuck, just like I was on that Christmas Eve back in 1978—six months shy of 6 years old, my neck stuck in the frame of my first two-wheeled bike,

heart thumping in my chest, in need of a little help. I could relate.

One of the best parts of my job as Indian River Community Foundation’s CEO is the relationships I share with

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some of the most generous people in our community. Fortunately, some of them are clients who look to my team and me for guidance and advice when making decisions about their charitable giving. Most of the time, these involve causes they already know and love. Several of them are open to helping on more risky ventures, like when an otherwise well-intentioned charity is stuck in a situation like the one Bike Walk found itself in.

After a few phone calls and some positive responses from clients, I was able to let the Bike Walk folks know that the Community Foundation could help with a few thousand dollars from one fund, a few

more from another. Using the grantmaking equivalent of my grandfather's wrench, I was able to send over about \$15,000—enough to help Bike Walk avert a crisis and remain on the road.

I've heard that the definition of integrity is doing the right thing when nobody is looking. If that is the case, then the volunteers responsible for carrying out Bike Walk's mission and programs have an abundance of it.

So do the generous donors who support a cause like Bike Walk, where so many variables required for the organization's overall success are out of its control: uncertainties that come from working with

bureaucracies, depending on a volunteer workforce, and serving children and other vulnerable populations, not to mention Florida's weather, road conditions, distracted drivers, and wayward landscaping trailers that drift into the bike lanes.

Achieving success as a new nonprofit charitable organization like Bike Walk is not always easy, either for its leaders or its benefactors. At some point, however, the training wheels must come off. If we let go of the seat, the legs start pumping, pedals turn. The wind rushes and the destination gets closer. A long way from stuck and a lot better for having made the journey. 🌱



Volunteer Carol Guaccero shows off a recently finished bike.



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