

# FIRST GEAR FOR FOSTER KIDS

JUNIOR MEMBERS GET THE WHEELS TURNING FOR BIKE NONPROFIT



By John Kinmonth

**R**iding a bicycle is an integral part of childhood, or so Bellevue High School seniors and Club members Matt Lee and Ryerson Schlitt believe.

But not every child gets the classic suburban experience of baskets on handlebars and homemade plywood ramps in the driveway.

In 2004, Matt began volunteering with Treehouse, a Seattle nonprofit that provides resources for foster children. He quickly realized that something was sorely missing.

"They only had two bikes in their bike rack,

and I thought, hey, I've had three bikes already," he says. Two years later, Matt started First Gear for Foster Kids as a continuation of his Eagle Scout service project.

"We got about 50 bikes that first year," he says. Now in his senior year at Bellevue High, Matt has raised the stakes on his initial project and transformed it into a club with more than 40 students.

"We're trying to collect 500 bikes by the end of the school year," Matt says. Through several late summer bike drives at local churches, First Gear for Foster Kids has already gathered 200 used bikes this



Ryerson Schlitt and Matt Lee.



year. The students clean and fix the bikes and deliver them to Treehouse to distribute to foster children.

Because state funding only covers 60 percent of the basic care costs for foster kids—and on average, the kids are moved one to two times per year—Matt says a bike is an important possession that can move with them.

“A lot of these kids move eight to nine times while they’re in care. They only take what they can fit in one or two pieces of luggage,” he says. “A bike is a piece of freedom they can take with them. It makes them a little more independent.”

Ryerson joined the Club this past year.

“When Matt told me about it, it seemed like a really good idea,” he says. “A lot of the kids have gone through a lot so a bike can be something to enjoy life a little more.”

Although grassroots, the club is divided into teams with groups focusing on repair, marketing, management, financials and creating a film documenting the efforts. Matt says most of the bikes are in decent condition and need only minor maintenance.

“We’ve gotten some nice, high-end bikes,” he says. “Most just need cleaning, but our bike work team is focused on repairing anything on the bikes. Any bike we can’t fix goes to Bikeworks, a nonprofit in South Seattle.”

Bel-Red Self Storage in Bellevue donated storage space to the group, but Matt says a lot of the bikes are stored at his house.

“We’re definitely looking for more storage space,” he says.

Not surprisingly, both Matt and Ryerson are interested in studying business in college next year. Matt is looking at the University of Pennsylvania, while Ryerson is thinking about staying closer to home.

“I’m a West Coast kid,” he says.

Matt is most interested in the social enterprise aspect of business where for-profit companies exist with the overarching goal of helping society. Besides First Gear for Foster Kids, Matt is also captain of the golf team and a member of the Microfinance Club, National Honor Society and Senior Class Office at Bellevue High School. Ryerson is on the water polo team.

To make a donation to First Gear for Foster Kids, visit <http://firstgear>

[forkids.org](http://forkids.org) or call 206-235-7784.

And, what’s the best part of the whole thing for Matt?

“The fact that it’s kids helping kids,” he says.

## 5 Reflections

### Favorite Book

**Ryerson:** “The Five People You Meet in Heaven”

**Matt:** “The Count of Monte Cristo”

### Favorite Movie

**Ryerson:** “Ironman”

**Matt:** “The Guardian”

### Favorite Food

**Ryerson:** Indian Food

**Matt:** Anything from Latin America

### Best Advice

**Ryerson:** Life is what you make it.

**Matt:** Bill Russell says, “Live your life without fear.”

### Favorite Bellevue Club Activity

**Ryerson:** Working out, food and racquetball.

**Matt:** Working out and then sitting in the hot tub.