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Spokes Group delivers joy on two wheels

Born from friendly competition, the group now provides bikes for thousands each year.

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From left, Dick Dunn, Larry Goodgame and Andy Beard have built the Spokes Group into a charity that provides bikes to thousands of kids. MICHAEL J. SOLENDER PHOTO

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For more information, go to www.thespokesgroup.com or www.salvationarmycharlotte.org.

What kid doesn't remember his very first bicycle?

Mine was a shiny red Sting-Ray, with a red-and-white "banana" seat. I took one of my mother's clothespins and attached a playing card to the rear wheel so the spokes would clip it and make the sound of a motor.

The joy I felt upon taking my first ride on my very own bike is exactly the moment that members of the Charlotte-based nonprofit Spokes Group are trying to create for thousands of area children this holiday season.

The nonprofit will distribute more than 2,100 new bicycles and helmets this year to disadvantaged youths, with the majority of those bikes going to kids in Mecklenburg County.

The group partners with The Salvation Army, which finds eligible recipients, distributing bikes through its annual Charlotte Christmas Bureau.

What started as a friendly competition between local Charlotte businessmen 17 years ago has blossomed into charitable giving on a scale truly representative of the generosity of our community.

Spokes Group co-founder Andy Beard recalled how his firm raised funds for the Salvation Army's Christmas Bureau in the mid-1990s and witnessed a bicycle giveaway first-hand.

"One mother spun the selection wheel (a device still used today, as demand far outstrips supply), and when it landed on a bicycle she went crazy," said Beard, "She was jumping up and down, overjoyed that she'd be able to give her child a bike. I knew right then I wanted to do what I could to bring that joy to others."

Beard shared his experience with his business neighbor, Dick Dunn, the organization's co-founder. "I told him our business could raise more funds for bikes than his," recalled Dunn.

That year, the businesses, along with the help of a third businessman, Larry Goodgame, raised funds for 217 bikes, all purchased at retail. Close to \$1 million and 23,000 bicycles later, the group is making a dramatic impact in many children's lives.

Growing in contributions every year, the group established nonprofit status four years ago. This coincided with negotiating directly with a bicycle manufacturer and making purchases in bulk.

"We purchase two different-size bikes for both boys and girls. Every child also gets a helmet with their bikes," said Beard.

"Since our inception, 100 percent of funds received from donors have gone directly to the purchase of bicycles and helmets."

"Many of our donors are individuals and small businesses," said Dunn. "We've even had children ask for donations for bikes in lieu of presents for their birthday parties."

Dunn, 79, is retiring from daily activity with the group next year, though he remains committed to the mission. "It is really heartwarming.

"Our average cost for a bike and helmet is only \$70; to see how much pleasure we can bring seems to be an investment that memory of a loved one or friend, in honor of a service person or as a holiday gift."

The Spokes Group has become a model for other organizations, including a group based in Raleigh. "We'll use our buying p

are committed to our mission," said Beard.

"We'll work with a group for their first year and match two for one , providing two bicycles for every one bike's worth of funds they raise."

Maj. Todd Hawks of the Greater Charlotte Area Salvation Army said organizations like the Spokes Group are great examples of people in the community reaching out to others.

"It is a step in faith when the Christmas Bureau provides a date and time" for recipients to return for their bikes, said Hawks, whose organization coordinates the giveaway for the Bureau.

"We have faith that there are those in the community who will come forward and help us meet the tremendous need for services. More than 14,000 area children will be provided with assistance, thanks to this need being met."

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