

New cycle of life for city's bikes

The Age
3/6/2011
p18

Melbourne's discarded bicycles are being reborn and hitting the road in Africa, writes **Carolyn Webb**.

WHEN Matt McCullough walked the streets of Opuwo in northern Namibia, little pieces of Melbourne kept zipping past.

Eighteen months before, in Yarraville, McCullough had helped pack 400 donated bicycles into a shipping container for the charity Bicycles for Humanity.

Seeing them being ridden by locals who previously had no means of transport, was "priceless", he says.

Some bikes were given free to Opuwo healthcare workers and the shipping container was converted into both a bicycle shop — to sell the rest of the bikes cheaply — and

a repair centre to employ and train locals.

"Before the bike shop being there, the closest place you could get a bike or get one serviced was about 300 kilometres away," McCullough says.

In the past two years, McCullough and three other Bicycles For Humanity volunteers have sent 1200 donated bicycles to Namibia and neighbouring Zambia.

They recently finished packing 400 more bikes into a shipping container, which sails for Africa this month.

Bicycles for Humanity has more than 20 global branches but it was a casual inquiry about an old friend three years ago that spurred

McCullough to start one up in Melbourne.

In the past six years, expat Melbourne Michael Linke has set up more than 25 mini-businesses in containers in Africa as part of a charity called the Bicycle Empowerment Network Namibia.





Ring the changes: Bicycles for Humanity volunteers Matt McCullough (right) and Andy Gild. A child receives a Melbourne bike in Zambia (below).

PICTURE: MICHAEL CLAYTON-JONES

Linke and McCullough had lost touch and McCullough asked a mutual friend what he was up to. "He said, 'Oh, he's in Africa somewhere bringing in secondhand bikes from Europe.'"

It intrigued McCullough, a keen cyclist and environmentalist who runs a St Kilda animation business. "Once I found out exactly what he was doing, I kind of had to get involved because it's an elegant solution to a problem," McCullough said.

"It's using an unused resource from here and putting it to great use somewhere where it will make a real difference."

And so Bicycles For Humanity Melbourne supplies Linke's outlets with bikes. The benefits have been enormous. In the town of Oshakati,

Namibia, workers started a computer centre behind their bike workshop with the business skills they learnt.

In Chibobo, Zambia, a midwife saved a mother and child in a difficult labour because he got there using a donated bike.

Asked why he does it, McCullough says: "It was a good fit. I like bikes and I like sustainability and I like making a difference, and there was a personal connection — Michael.

"There's the people that it puts me in touch with; a gratifying sense of making a difference, doing something that matters. I find it interesting, all the skills I need to develop to make it all happen."

In Melbourne, donated bikes can be dropped at Bicycle Super-

store outlets. McCullough says they must be adult-sized mountain bikes "or sturdy hybrids" in working order.

He says bike donors often have an emotional attachment to their bicycle but the project means the story of their bike continues in a positive way and it doesn't rot in a garage.

"You're sending it somewhere it's being used and making a difference," he says.

Funding to run Bicycles for Humanity in Melbourne has come from bicycle accessories company Knog, and also from supporters making it their nominated charity in sporting events through everydayhero.com.au. Individuals have also raised money with cycling efforts, from Melbourne to

Cairns, and from Perth to Melbourne.

This year, a Kiwi adventurer called Hap Cameron raised more than \$10,000 to send the third Bicycles For Humanity shipping container from Melbourne to Africa. This month Cameron and his girlfriend Amanda Todd will follow the trucking route of the container from Cape Town by cycling 5000 kilometres north to Katima Mulilo, Namibia, where they will help convert it into a Bicycle Empowerment Network outlet.

Cameron, 29, vowed in 2003 to live and work on all seven continents before the age of 30 — Africa is the seventh.

For more information, go to bicyclesforhumanity.com