

Rolling gifts – 2,700 bikes – to needy kids in San Jose

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Jesus Cazarez, 13, rides his new bike outside Jim Schallau's home in San Jose, Calif., Saturday, Dec. 20, 2014. Jesus, and his brother, Isidro, 16, were nominated by the Almaden Cycle Touring Club to receive bikes from Turning Wheels for Kids, a non-profit run by a San Jose nurse, which has given away thousands of new bikes to needy kids at Christmas. (Patrick Tehan/Bay Area News Group)

SAN JOSE — The driveway was still damp from a week's worth of rain when Jim Schallau, an avid cyclist, led two teenage boys into the garage for their early Christmas gifts — two new mountain bikes still in the cardboard boxes.

Isidro and Jesus Cazarez beamed and touched the boxes a bit awkwardly, not sure what to do next. The boxes didn't bear gift tags or any markings

they were donated by TurningWheels for Kids, a charity that expects to give 2,700 bikes to low-income children this season.

"But you have to help me put them together," Schallau said.

"Of course we'll help," said Isidro, a talkative 16-year-old.

And with that agreement, the retired engineer and Korean War veteran with 98,000 cycling miles behind him, got to work assembling the bicycles with the two low-income boys from across town who had never owned a decent bike until Saturday morning. The last one they shared was stolen years ago.

"We kind of gave up on bikes after that," Isidro said.

Vital helmets

The bikes were assembled in a couple of hours with extra help from Marge Schallau, Jim's wife and cycling companion, and Tony Le, a Stanford Medical School researcher and president of the Amaden Cycle Touring Club.

Not only did the boys learn some of the mechanics of bicycle ownership, they heard all sorts of cycling tales from Le and the Schallaus, from touring across beautiful countrysides to surviving crashes. The latter were meant to persuade the boys to wear their new helmets, which came with the bikes.

"You don't have to worry about me," Isidro, who told them a story of his own. A girl he knew back in 5th grade was killed in a collision with a car. "She wasn't wearing a helmet. All the kids in school were shaken up."

After a test ride, the boys were ready to go.

Lots of children will receive their TurningWheels bikes from nonprofit organizations that work directly with low-income families and select the recipients. This year, the charity, started by Santa Clara Valley Medical

Center nurse Sue Runsvold, introduced a nomination process for individuals, clubs and others. That's how the Cazarez boys got their bikes.

The Schallaus met their mother, Martina Palomino, about 14 years ago through a program at Sacred Heart Community Services in San Jose that connects needy families with volunteers willing to help in personal and practical ways.

"I was pregnant with Jesus when they adopted me!" Palomino, 38, said in Spanish in a telephone interview. "It has been the greatest blessing in my life to have met this couple."

She said the Schallaus have taught her how to supervise her sons' homework assignments and motivate them to succeed in school, navigate bureaucracies, hunt for affordable housing and manage her modest finances.

"I have known their family for 14 years and theirs has been a tough life," Jim Schallau wrote in a touching, winning nomination to TurningWheels. "Their father has not been part of the family for many years and their mother struggles to provide a home and food for the boys. . . I am certain that new bikes for Isidro and Jesus will make this a Christmas that they and their mother will never forget."

Lots of assembling

Palomino cleans houses and cares for an elderly, housebound man on weekends. She and the boys live in an apartment in south San Jose. The two families have stayed in touch even after the program that brought them together ended.

Jim Schallau had been volunteering to assemble bikes for TurningWheels for eight years, never getting to see kids when they actually received their bikes. So he jumped at the chance to nominate the Cazarez boys.

"These bikes will get the boys to school and will help their mother, too," he said.

Palomino said she often has to interrupt her cleaning jobs to drive Isidro to school, where he is enrolled in independent studies and doesn't follow a traditional schedule.

"I'm always asking her for rides to meet my friends," Isidro said as he straddled his shiny, new black 21-speed bike. "I can tell when she's too tired and irritated, but she drives me anyway. This will definitely help my mom."

And the bikes will help the two families continue their friendship. Their first official ride together would be to look for the safest routes from the boys' home to their schools, followed by long rides on South Bay bike trails and bike paths. But for now, the boys were relishing their new wheels.

"It's cool," Jesus said after his first test ride, "really cool."

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