

BIKE GIVEAWAY A HIT AT VAFB : Many of the kids who got new wheels have parents deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan

NORA K. WALLACE, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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With jaws dropping in surprise and smiles wide in delight, more than 100 children from Vandenberg Air Force Base and Lompoc received extra-special Christmas presents on Saturday — brand new bicycles and helmets.

The children — including many with a parent deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan or with parents suffering financial hardship — walked up to the rows of brand new bikes lined up in front of Bicycles Unlimited and rode away beaming.

For the fourth year, the bikes — red, black, blue and pink — were purchased with funds raised by the Village Dirtbags mountain bike team and donated to children ranging in age from 1 to 16.

An added element this year was the presentation of three custom bikes for disabled veterans, including a recent double amputee who served in Iraq and a Vietnam veteran and last year had his left leg amputated after suffering with an old war injury.

The Village Dirtbags riding group is a club of about 25 avid weekly cyclists who are by day local business people, teachers, firefighters, physicians and others. The team works closely with Vandenberg's Airmen and Family Readiness program to determine which children will be given a bicycle. This year, some non-military families from the Lompoc area also received a bike, as well as four bikes for families living at the Good Samaritan shelter.

Roger McConnell, a financial adviser, is a Village Dirtbag founding member and major promoter of the charitable effort.

Recently, he heard someone speaking about military people in Afghanistan, and how they are "guarding the perimeter of our freedom."

"That really summarizes it," Mr. McConnell said. "It's our way of saying thank you, not only to the folks at Vandenberg, but to let everyone else know we really do want to thank those who are guarding the perimeter of our freedom."



Bicycles Unlimited in Lompoc was the scene of the 4th annual bike giveaway for kids from Vandenberg AFB who have a parent deployed. Five members of the Wallace family received bicycles at the giveaway. Pictured from left are Madison, Katelynn, Tabitha and Haley Wallace. Their brother, Cody Wallace is in the background getting his bike.

LAURA DICKINSON/NEWS-PRESS PHOTO



Chase Faulenberry, 7, laughs as he chats with Santa Claus after getting his new bicycle.

He said he often thinks of the parents of the children receiving bikes.

"I think of the dads walking down a dusty trail in Afghanistan, hoping not to get picked off by a sniper," he said. "Or of moms, not on the front line, but maybe driving a truck and hoping not to run over an IED. They're doing it because they want to be there, but they're also doing it for everybody in the United States."

For more than an hour Saturday, 10-year-old Jason, 7-year-old Gabriel and 5-year-old Briana Cassim excitedly rode their new bikes around the donation area parking lot. Their father, Vandenberg Tech. Sgt. Shawn Cassim, is serving in Qatar, in the Middle East, for the next six months. Their mother, Veronica, surprised the children Saturday with the news of the gifts, and took a video to send to her deployed husband.

"This is overwhelming," said Mrs. Cassim, whose husband has deployed five times in their 11 years of marriage. "We've been overseas for eight years and I've never seen this kind of support for soldiers. My heart is overjoyed to see all this."

Jason, a 5th grader at Crestview Elementary School, deemed his new black Viper bike "cool."

"I have a bike but it's really hard to ride," he explained. "The chain is all old and rusty."

The effort has grown steadily since its first giveaway of 12 bikes, helped by word of mouth, pleas to friends and family from club members and even an airwave boost from radio personality Dr. Laura Schlessinger.

The first year of the bike giveaway, the bikers were able to raise funds for 12 bikes. That jumped to 70 by 2008, and this year, the goal was 100, which was surpassed by a few.

A number of organizations and individuals donated multiple bikes and helmets, which cost about \$175 for each child. The Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians donated 12 bikes and Dr. Rob Holdsambeck purchased 10 bikes. The third graders at Crestview Elementary School at Vandenberg purchased seven bikes and helmets as part of a philanthropic project.

Dr. Schlessinger chatted for more than a week to her millions of listeners about the Village Dirtbag efforts, Mr. McConnell said. She also promoted it on her web site, helping raise funds.

"Families of deployed military are suffering terrible loss of their family member — for sometimes a year and a half — as well as the fears that go along with a loved one in harm's way," she wrote in an e-mail to the News-Press. "The military stand between us and tyranny and terrorist attacks. Because of what the families have to deal with, they are warriors also. One powerful way to show our military folks that we are in profound awe of their willingness to serve and take the risks for us all is to take care of their families. And the sure fire way to the hearts of military folks is to make their children feel special. These bikes do just that. I love this program and intend to stay with them Christmases to come."

The custom bikes for veterans were created by Lightning Cycle Dynamics in Lompoc. The bicycles, which cost about \$2,000 each, are recumbent and propelled by hand pedals. The donation to the Veterans Administration Loma Linda Healthcare Systems was facilitated by Lompoc Dr. Michael Gill, a Village Dirtbag member.

The decision to expand the bike-giveaway came as many ideas do with the Dirtbags — they were sitting



Disabled veteran Jim Daniels of Desert Hot Springs smiles as he tries out a custom-made bicycle.



around after a ride drinking beers and talking.

"A couple of the guys in the group were in the military, or their dads were in the military and we thought, 'Why not do something for vets?' " Mr. McConnell explained. "That's what it is about this group — someone comes up with an idea and it doesn't go to waste."

Mr. McConnell said the \$6,000 for the three custom bikes was raised among club members.

"We've done something unique, but it happens all the time in Lompoc," he said.

Dr. Kelli McSwan, a neuropsychologist at Loma Linda, said the exposure to the custom bikes helps the wounded veterans learn that there are still athletic things they can do. One bike will remain at Loma Linda, enabling a variety of veterans to test it out and learn how to use it.

"There's such a sense of freedom," she said about the bicycles.

On Saturday, Vietnam veteran Jim Daniels, a Desert Hot Springs resident, arrived in Lompoc bearing a prosthetic leg designed with the American flag. Since his injury in the war, he endured 18 surgeries and three total knee replacements.

"Over the last five years, the pain has been unmanageable," the 60-year-old said.

Thirteen months ago, he had his leg amputated. He has missed taking bike rides at the beach with his wife, he said.

"I tried a regular bike a month ago and couldn't do it," he said, noting his lack of leg movement to allow pedaling. "This is going to be great. My wife and I used to ride all the time. Now we can ride together."

The other recipient, a young soldier in his 20s, was injured in Iraq by a mortar round and lost both his legs. He was not able to make it on Saturday.

"He's gone through extensive rehab, but he didn't think one of these things (bikes) was possible ... We want to see veterans excited, especially when they've been through so much. It's so exciting to see them get something like this."

The new bikes, Dr. McSwan said, will enable the men to have more control over their own bodies.

"So much has been taken from them," she said. "They hear what they're not supposed to do, or what they can't do. It's neat to say 'This is something you can do.' It's also a sense of empowerment, to let them go fast, to feel the wind, to be able to work up a sweat."

e-mail: nwallace@newspress.com