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Monroe prison inmates restoring bikes for the needy

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Marvin Chapman and Richard Gillmere are among a small crew of inmates at the Monroe Correctional Complex who volunteer to repair stolen or abandoned bicycles collected by the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office. Once repaired, the bikes are turned over to local human-services groups so they can be handed out to needy adults and children.

By [Jennifer Sullivan](#)
Seattle Times staff reporter



Inmate Marvin Chapman adjusts a derailleur cable while working on a bike at the prison repair facility. Officer Wayne George, who also volunteers in the program on his personal time, watches from a doorway.
MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES



The Twin Rivers' storage area is protected by barbed wire. MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Marvin Chapman pulls a tiny magenta- and plum-colored bicycle off a shelf and begins a careful inspection.

He laments the bike's condition, judging the white nubby tires inadequate to zip a child around. Nearby, Richard Gillmere turns away from his own repairs on an adult's mountain bike to assure Chapman they can fix up the little girl's bike in time for Christmas.

Chapman and Gillmere are among a small crew of inmates at the Monroe Correctional Complex who volunteer their time and labor to repair stolen or abandoned bicycles collected by the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office. Once repaired, the bikes are turned over to human-services groups, which distribute them to needy adults and children.

State Department of Corrections Officer Wayne George, who oversees the program, said that in the three years since they opened the repair shop inside the prison's Twin Rivers Unit, inmates have refurbished more than 200 bikes.

"I just enjoy giving back," said Gillmere, 45, of Bellingham. "Most of us have been taking most of our lives."

Inmates work in a tiny room just off the prison gym, three evenings a week. They have a seemingly endless pool of bicycles to work from, with more than 150 bent, broken and scuffed-up bikes awaiting their attention.

Shari Ireton, spokeswoman for the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office, said most of the bicycles delivered to the prison were abandoned on Community Transit buses or on transit property. A small number were found abandoned or collected by deputies during criminal investigations.

Ireton said bicycles that are recovered by deputies are held in the Sheriff's Office evidence facility for 60 days, in case someone claims them, before they're turned over to the prison.

"To supply bikes to kids is total excitement. I know they're using them, they're enjoying them," said Susan Goettsch, a resource coordinator at Volunteers of America in Everett. "The bikes they get are phenomenal. They're really nice."

Goettsch said she gives George a list of the bikes she needs for clients, mostly children, and picks them up at the prison.

"When I was a kid, having a bike was a normal thing, and it was used year-round. It gave you a sense of freedom. Today, a lot of them can't afford that expense," Goettsch said.

George said the bike shop developed out of a nearly 10-year-old program at Stafford Creek Corrections Center in Aberdeen. An inmate who transferred from Stafford Creek to Monroe told him about the program, and George, a bicyclist himself, was intrigued.

Inmates have to undergo an intensive interview before they're allowed into the program to ensure they can be trusted around tools and won't violate their freedom to work evenings out of their cells.

An ability to repair bicycles is not a requirement, George said.

At Stafford Creek, facilities manager Chris Idso said he prefers inmates who have never repaired a bike before.

"More often than not, you find yourself looking for offenders who have good attitudes, an open mind and a willingness to learn," Idso said.

Unlike the Monroe program, Stafford Creek inmates are paid for their bike-repair work, with wages topping out at 42 cents an hour, or \$55 per month. Inmates at the Aberdeen prison can crank out about 50 bikes per month, Idso said.

Prison officials also are considering paying the Monroe inmates who participate in the program.

Both prison programs rely on donations — the Lion's Club in Aberdeen donates money to buy chain guards, paint, new tires, reflectors and other gear, Idso said.

In Monroe, a nearby Knights of Columbus chapter and George's church, St. Michaels, in Snohomish, donate funds, George said.

George, who comes in on his time off to run the repair shop, said other community members with a love for biking and bicycle repairs also work with the four inmate volunteers in the program.

"Officer George does a lot to train them (inmates)," said Sally Neiland, superintendent of the Twin Rivers Unit, a complex that houses medium-security inmates and the state's Sex Offender Treatment Program.

Gillmere, who is in prison for first-degree child rape, said he's been riding and repairing bikes since he was 6. But, he jokes, George has taught him how to fix them correctly.

"I was from one of the families who would have gotten something from this program," Gillmere said.

Chapman, 25, who is serving time for first-degree manslaughter with a deadly weapon, said he loves the work — especially fixing up BMX-style bikes for more daredevil kids.

"I'm here trying to help other people. I believe in karma," Chapman said. "If you do good things, good things will happen to you."

News researcher Miyoko Wolf contributed to this report.

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