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Bringing everyone along for the ride

Company offers bikes for people with special needs

by Alan P. Henry

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As 11-year-old Northbrook resident Joey Cohen stood proudly astride his makeshift bicycle, the joy in his eyes sent clear instructions to his father.

Two years later, a uniquely designed bicycle inspired by that silent conversation between a boy with nonverbal autism and his dad is bringing similar joy to thousands of people with special needs across the country.

The process of discovery was sparked by Joey's frustration that he couldn't ride a bike like everyone else. He at least wanted to be able to walk while sitting on one, but the pedals kept hitting him in the shins. So his father, Steven, removed the pedals and drive train from a bike and lowered the seat, and Joey immediately took to it.

"He talked by his excitement," Steven said.

In short order, Steven had similarly stripped down half a dozen more bikes so the entire family could walk/ride around the neighborhood together.

One parent asked Steven to build a similar bike for his autistic son. Then more showed interest.

Figuring that maybe this was the beginning of a small local bike program, Steven donated stripped bikes to the suburban Riverwoods Center for Enriched Living, where adults with developmental disabilities who had never been on a bike before were similarly thrilled by the experience.

"And then I realized, 'I don't have a bike program, I have a bike business, and Joey is teaching it, and he doesn't talk,'" Steven said.

Steven, a third-generation partner in Aaron Equipment Company in Bensenville, teamed up with Bike USA in Bethlehem, Pa., and JoRide Bicycles was off and riding.

Today, JoRide bikes have been purchased by roughly 80 school districts in the Chicago metropolitan area and many more around the country. Care facilities, youth centers and individuals have also purchased the bikes for children and adults with special needs.

Partnerships are flourishing with the Center for Enriched Living, the North Suburban Special Education District, the North Suburban Special Recreation Association, Autism Speaks, Autism Illinois, the Special Education District of Lake County, Keshet and other organizations. The North Suburban YMCA is planning to offer a JoRide riding program this summer. In January, Konica Minolta Business Solutions U.S. partnered with JoRide Bicycles to host a brunch at Keshet International Center, where 60 JoRide bicycles were donated to local organizations, schools and families.

The two models currently being manufactured, priced at \$200 and \$250, are also now available online through Amazon, JoRide and Bike USA, as well as other websites.

"This is providing children with balance skills and newfound confidence and independence," Steven said. "You walk and ride at the same time. You never lose your balance."

More importantly, he said, individuals who once felt left out because they couldn't ride a typical bike now feel like they belong.

"It looks, tastes and smells like a bike. You look like your peers, not someone special," he said. "When the kids see the bicycle, they get so excited. They say, 'You're going to put me on a bicycle!'"

Steven, a 1987 graduate of Glenbrook North, said JoRide bikes also promote fitness and can be used in adaptive physical education



Pictured is a bike for people with special needs designed by JoRide Bicycles, founded by Northbrook resident Steven Cohen.



Thirteen-year-old Joey Cohen rides a JoRide Bicycle, which he inspired.

classes and to assist with occupational therapy.

"It gives kids something to do, rather than sitting on the sidelines, watching other people do," he said. "It gets you up and going."

Steven is quick to deflect credit for the company's success.

"This is not about me. This is about Joey," he said. "He is the driver of this. It's all coming from him."

The third of five children, 13-year-old Joey now attends Northbrook Junior High School.

The JoRide bike is now being used by people ranging in age from 7-70 and has been met with critical acclaim from the special needs community.

And in addition to becoming an increasingly integral part of the special needs education process, JoRide has also become an informational source. Steven pens a regular column, "Special Needs, Special Times," that highlights places to go and things to do for people with special needs and their families.

Going forward, Steven plans to get as many schools, hospitals, community centers, and temples and churches on board as possible. He also has his eye on larger venues, like the Chicago Botanic Garden.

But it's not the numbers that he cares most about. It's still all about the joy in Joey's eyes, the leadership example he is setting and the reminder that children with autism have much to give.

"Here is a nonverbal guy who is a great communicator," Steven said of his son. "He is teaching others."