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Dumpster diving for kid treasures

Items discarded in ritzy Highland Park get new life as gifts for needy foster children

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As a 3-year-old boy on Chicago's South Side smiled shyly and climbed onto his new bicycle, it made no difference to him that the bike had been salvaged from a Highland Park trash pile.

Days earlier, Chicago lawyer Todd Kooperman, 28, and his dad, Alan, 63, trolled the North Shore community's streets as darkness fell, searching for bicycles, bed frames, toy basketball hoops and anything else deemed worthy of repair during an annual trash cleanup event.

The small bike emerged as one of their better finds, especially after Alan added training wheels to it in his garage-turned-workshop, where a dozen bicycles hung overhead.

The Koopermans' scavenging expedition was part of an unusual volunteer effort over the last two years to help meet the needs of children in foster homes where money is scarce. Organized by lawyers who represent children in the Cook County public guardian's office, the new non-profit charity operates under the name Our Community of Illinois.

"These kids have no resources. Their foster parents can't afford to get them anything," said Todd Kooperman, one of the five assistant public guardians based in Chicago who helps oversee the group.

He began contributing to the charity after asking some of his young clients — most of them wards of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services — what they would like if they had three wishes.

"Quite often they say, 'a bike,'" said Kooperman, whose father drove 82 miles in two days during their last trash-picking hunt in May. "Soon after, I started picking up bikes."

Our Community (affectionately dubbed by its founders as "The O.C.," after the television drama) has also provided families with car seats, as well as a laptop computer for one teen and driving lessons for another young man.

The charity has started small, but its ambitious leaders are determined to expand its reach by providing kids with educational services, such as tutoring. While the group appreciates donations, its biggest needs right now are storage space and money, with Alan Kooperman's Highland Park garage serving as a temporary warehouse for bicycles and mattresses.

The retired high school auto mechanics teacher fixed and helped deliver 36 bikes last summer. He built a trailer that he pulls behind his sport-utility vehicle that fits

mattresses, furniture, musical instruments and other items he spiffs up and often delivers to needy families.

Having lived in the community 34 years, he has prowled every neighborhood and knows where he is most likely to find the best trash, such as an \$800 mountain bike he retrieved one year. At home in his garage, he dons rubber gloves and greases chains, polishes bike frames and inflates tires.

"It's easy to walk away and not be involved in things," said Kooperman, who likes to see his neighbors' "conspicuous consumption" put to good use for others. "You see people who need help and you help them."

No one has yet objected, he said, and some neighbors have even brought their used bicycles to him, leaving them outside Kooperman's garage.

His efforts mesh well with the goals of James Burton, 50, the assistant public guardian who dreamed up the Our Community charity and filed for non-profit status.

"I would like to see every kid in DCFS have a laptop computer to take to school," Burton said. "A lot of these kids have no computers at all. We're kind of trying to give them a leg up."

About 9,000 children and youths up to age 21 fall under public guardianship in Cook County, usually because they have been removed from their home due to neglect or abuse, said Robert Harris, the Cook County public guardian.

When a child moves into a foster home, the DCFS provides money for clothing and one-time expenses. After that, the state pays foster parents a monthly rate that varies depending on the child's age and other factors, but usually falls between \$372 and \$458, said DCFS spokesman Kendall Marlowe.

For most children, the allotment doesn't go far enough, especially when youngsters reach the teenage years, Burton said. The children may move from one foster home to the next, and their clothing and personal belongings don't always travel with them, he said.

Because they move so often, they fall behind in school and have few steady influences in their lives, he said.

The proportion of foster children who drop out of Chicago Public Schools from ages 13 to 15 is more than double the average for other students in the system, according to a 2004 study by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

"More of these kids go to prison than they do to college," Burton said. "If we can do just a few little things to help these kids – if it's getting a prom dress, a computer – sometimes it makes a big difference in kids' lives."

Community groups often help provide foster children with Christmas gifts, tickets to events or other wish-list items. But the assistant public guardians work directly with young clients and see firsthand what they are lacking, from a proper bed or textbook to luxury items, such as bicycles.

Todd Kooperman began his job in 2005, and it made perfect sense to turn to his father to help those families; his dad has salvaged trash for years in what some might view as a highfalutin form of Dumpster diving.

During Highland Park's monthlong annual trash pickup, in which residents are encouraged to leave big items at the curb, the Koopermans compete with other treasure hunters. Some target items, such as metal, can be resold.

"There's one guy I call the bicycle maniac," said Kooperman, as he maneuvered around four trucks on a narrow street on a recent Friday night. "He cut me off last year."

The Koopermans said they can spot trends and even gauge the economy based on trash and who's collecting it.

"This year there are more people [collecting trash] than I've ever seen," Alan

Kooperman said. "I think it's an indication of the economy."

Through the public guardian's office, the Koopermans see their efforts pay off as they match a polished-up bike or bed frame with a needy family.

"You build relationships," said Jessica Haspel, 29, of Chicago, one of the lawyers who organized Our Community.

She recently delivered the bicycle with orange wheels to Sterling Davis Dukes, 3, who last September moved back into the home of his biological mother, Mary Davis Dukes, 41, of Chicago.

Dukes completed drug treatment, steadily worked in a janitorial job and followed other court-ordered requirements to get her son back.

"I made a big change," said Dukes, her eyes welling with tears as she thanked Haspel for the bike and a car seat.

"This is all he's been talking about," Dukes said, the day of the bike's arrival. "He's been up and ready for this day."

Harris said he is not surprised his employees spend much of their free time trying to give more to their young clients.

"The people who gravitate to this office are givers; they want to do something for the social good," he said. "Even though they come and work long hours, and sometimes the work is really grueling and you see some bad things, they find things to do like tutor or mentor [a child]."

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READER CONNECTION: Would you like to learn how to help? Check www.ocillinois.org or call James Burton at 773-680-9121.

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