

Back in the Saddle

Program for visually impaired cyclists

By Amy Kraft

Children, bike messengers and Tour de France trainees aren't the only ones you'll find cruising city bike paths this summer. The New York chapter of the Achilles Track Club recently kicked off its official Tandem Bike Program for the visually impaired.

Organized by Achilles city coordinator and Upper East Sider Stewart Meadowcroft, the group meets in Central Park twice a month, equipped with tandem bicycles and trained bike captains, to enable people with visual disabilities to experience the benefits of cycling.

"I'm really concerned with safety today because this is the first time for all of our riders," Meadowcroft said on a recent bike ride.

Visually impaired participants appeared to have no worries, however, and they were thrilled with the opportunity to ride a bicycle.

"I want to do it again," said Maria Rios on her way back from a six-mile ride around Central Park. Rios lost her sight to meningitis when she was a child and said she hadn't been on a bicycle for five years.

"It was a great experience," she said. "I'm really happy we have Achilles to help those of us who can't do things like this ourselves."

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The tandem bike program was inspired by Artie Elephant, a 63-year-old Achilles New York chapter athlete who was forced to stop riding his bike more than 20 years ago when he lost most of his vision due to retinitis pigmentosa. In 2003, local resident Zoe Waldron approached the organization with a tandem bike, and Elephant began riding with her. Since then, he has been developing a program to help other disabled people experience the thrill of riding a bike.



Zoe Waldron, Rich Conroy, Stewart Meadowcroft and Artie Elephant, founders of the tandem bike program.

"There really isn't anything as rewarding as the feeling of the wind on your face and the smells and sounds of the world as you ride through it—feelings that I have only recently rediscovered through tandem biking," Elephant said.

Elephant and his colleagues have been raising money for enough bicycles to open the program to all members of Achilles, who have visual and other disabilities. They worked with the bicycle company Fuji to get a deal on 10 tandem bikes, and two other bicycles were donated to the group.

"Now we are working on getting volunteers to train to be bike captains," Elephant said.

In order to learn the proper technique required for steering a tandem bicycle, the tandem bike program offers educational sessions led by Bike New York's bicycle education program director, Rich Conroy. Conroy teaches volunteer bike captains how to properly balance, brake, mount and dismount bicycles for two, and fit helmets in a two- to three-hour training session.

To find out about upcoming tandem bike dates and locations, or to volunteer to be a bike captain, contact Stewart Meadowcroft at smeadowcroft@achillestrackclub.org.