

# Bike Church

## Public Celebrates Cycling, Remembers Fallen Bicyclists

Article and photos by Joe Pangburn



**Bike Church, made up almost exclusively from old, unusable bike parts, was completed in eight weeks by two artists, two assistants, two volunteers and eight high school students.**

Cycling evokes a varied range of emotions: joy, bliss, determination, accomplishment and sometimes sorrow for those who've been lost.

Two artists and their two assistants teamed with eight high school students and two volunteers to capture all of those emotions into a new piece of public art they've called the "Bike Church" on Main Avenue, just north of St. Mary's.

Artists Joe O'Connell, of Creative Machines and Blessing Hancock lead the group in building the structure.

"We wanted to go with a familiar shape for this," Hancock said. "We didn't want to build a 'bike church' and have people look at it trying to see the church part of it. So we looked at old schoolhouses and churches as our models to take from with this. The church was the perfect form to take for this because that kind of embodies all the emotions we hoped it would evoke."

The one-of-a-kind bicycle art, shade structure and memorial installed in mid August is 21-feet tall, has a base of 12 feet by 14 feet and is built nearly entirely out of old bike parts purchased from BICAS, Bicycle Inter Community Action and Salvage. The parts were pieces that could no longer be used by BICAS to build bikes.

"It was this pile of junk basically," Hancock said. "There is something to be said for taking something that had a previous use and using it to make art. It was very interesting to work with."

At night the church is lighted with

two solar powered lights, one in a chandelier made from bicycle gears.

The project was made possible by a \$50,000 grant from the Pima Association of Governments (PAG) for an eight-week summer youth employment art program.

"We were chosen for the project and we interviewed and selected the eight students," O'Connell said. "While those students had an aptitude for art, most of what they had created was two dimensional drawing or painting and art was also something they did on their own, so we spent some time team building and working on projects together."

PAG had requested the theme of the project be cycling, but the rest was up to the team.

"We were looking at several sites for the project and once this site was chosen, it's such a large site, we knew we couldn't do anything small because it would be lost," O'Connell said. "We knew it had to be big."

The site was chosen partially because it is along a main route into downtown for commuters, and also because it's the site of a future park in the Barrio Anita neighborhood. It will also be a starting/finishing point of the planned El Paso and Southwestern Greenway, a City of Tucson and Regional Transportation Authority project that will be a six-mile multi-use path for

bicyclists and pedestrians. The pathway will extend along a corridor that was once used by the railroad, from north of downtown Tucson, through the City of South Tucson to the Kino Sports Complex. The preliminary plan for the route was drawn up in 2005; no completion date has been given.

The multi-cultural, multi-denominational, walk-in structure will serve as a celebration of cycling as well as a shrine for fallen local cyclists. The community is encouraged to hang pictures and other mementos with magnets on the structure.

"We don't want it to be solely a memorial site," O'Connell said. "But we understand that will be an important aspect of it to the community."

Because of its size, the students did not see the finished product until it was assembled on site.

"It looks amazing," said Johnny Galvez, one of the student artists. "I'm definitely going to bring people by here and show them. I mean, I helped make this and it is going to be here forever."

Elizabeth Raskob, another student artist, was extremely excited to work on an art project celebrating cycling. Each student created his or her own stained glass window with cut steel around the top of the structure. Raskob created hers to resemble an eye.

"Bikes have really opened up my eyes to a lot of things in the world I wouldn't have seen without them," she said. "It is a wonderful thing."

City of Tucson Councilwoman Regina Romero spoke to gathering of nearly 75 people, many on bikes, who came out for the celebration of the installation of the piece.

"This is a statement piece," she said afterward. "We want it known that cycling is very important in Tucson and our region and we support it. This was also an investment in our community and in our youth."

"I'm so glad the cycling community came out to support the unveiling of this," Hancock said. "We really want the cycling community to embrace it."

Her hope was that in time, as friends get together for a ride, one might just say, 'meet me at Bike Church.'



**The artists and the students who built Bike Church. From left: Blessing Hancock, teaching artist; Serena D'Ippolito, student; Elizabeth Raskob, student; Mosade Virgil, student; Martin Gonzalez, student; Rian Romero, student; Leah Edwards, student; Johnny Galvez, student; and Joe O'Connell, teaching artist. Team members not shown: Sheila Leftwich, student; Elliot Hart, assistant and volunteers Jonathan Katz and Kip Perkins.**

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