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## Helping Singapore's vulnerable youth through their love for fixed-gear cycling



Fixie riders practising stunts near Shenton Way on a Fast Friday - a tradition in fixie culture where fixed-gear cyclists meet and ride. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

**Venessa Lee**

UPDATED APR 3, 2021, 11:00 AM ▼

SINGAPORE - It is 10pm on a Friday and an inconspicuous street near Shenton Way is buzzing.

More than 20 males, in their teens and 20s, have converged to ride their fixed-gear bicycles, which are known as fixies.

Mostly dressed in black, they zoom down the cul-de-sac on these brakeless bicycles. Some perform stunts, vaulting themselves in the air on their bikes or doing wheelies, where the front wheel is raised.

The young men call these nights Fast Fridays - a tradition in fixie culture where fixed-gear cyclists meet and ride. The term is said to have originated in the United States.

Fixie groups here - some with names like Team Tiber and Gogogina (a play on "geena", a Hokkien term for kid) - expand as newcomers join the rides, which last hours. Group rides also take place on other days and in the daytime.

"Think of it as the equivalent of Friday night drinks. It's the end of the week and not a school night," says Mr Wayne Ong, 20, who co-founded Nice Bikes, a home-based business that buys, sells and repairs fixies, when he was 17.

Mr Ong, who recently completed a polytechnic course in architecture, adds that he turns up for Fast Fridays more to network than ride these days.

But the convivial mood is dampened when the police arrive one recent Friday, citing a complaint about noise levels. The police have dispersed fixie groups in the area in the past, the riders say.

One 17-year-old, who wants to be known by his biking moniker, Daniel Liberty, says: "This street was used by us for bonding. The adults will not understand. If we were fighting, I would understand, but this is just a bunch of kids from all over Singapore."

The Institute of Technical Education student adds: "At home, I would be eating and watching YouTube and TV all day. Where's the bond if you're only texting and calling your friends? There's no time for stress when we're all together. It's an amazing family."

## Fixies in the spotlight

Fixies generally do not have brakes and instead rely on the rider's pedal resistance to stop.

Safety concerns arose last year when a 13-year-old riding a fixed-gear bicycle fell to her death after she collided with a railing in a multi-storey carpark in Pasir Ris.

The Government announced in January that all bicycles used on public paths and roads must have at least one functioning handbrake - a rule which will kick in from September.

While fixed-gear bikes have come under scrutiny, they have also helped to build a passionate community of riders.



The young fixed-gear cyclists go on rides that last hours, sometimes traversing the island. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

Daniel is one of four teenagers, all avid fixie hobbyists, who completed the iLearn Social Workshop last month. The pilot project, which involves charities Care Corner Singapore and Cycling Without Age Singapore, started in September last year.

The participants were most interested in its apprenticeship scheme at bike repair shops, says Mr Martin Chok, 43, assistant director at Care Corner's youth services arm.

"We use their interest in bicycles as an entry point to effect change. We know these young people exhibit or are vulnerable to risky behaviours," he adds.

Besides repairing and maintaining different types of bicycles, including road and mountain bikes, at least once a week, the teens were assigned mentors and learnt skills such as dealing with customers and managing a shop and website.

They mostly come from challenging backgrounds, such as being estranged from family members or lacking supervision at home, while not showing interest in school, says Mr Chok.

"We have been successful in introducing trusted adults and mentors into the lives of these adolescents."





While fixed-gear bikes have come under scrutiny, they have also helped to build a passionate community of riders. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

Care Corner also supports adolescents and young adults at risk of being recruited by gangs.

"They hang out on the streets until late at night and don't engage in meaningful activities," says Mr Chok, whose organisation works to rehabilitate young people involved in gangs.

These vulnerable youth may start out smoking and even engage in vaping, which is illegal in Singapore, he notes.

They may then progress to taking drugs or joining gangs under negative peer influence. Youngsters may be recruited as drug peddlers or as runners for loan sharks.

What gangs give some young people is a sense of belonging.

"'Street families' - complete with a designated father, mother or uncle - provide more attention and attachment than the youth might get from their own families," says Mr Chok.

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## Cycling as a form of escape

Zah (not his real name), 14, was selected as the fifth participant in the iLearn Social Workshop, but dropped out late last year after failing his subjects badly with "straight U grades".

The Secondary 3 student, who took up smoking at the age of nine after his father died suddenly, says he quit drinking last year.

For Zah, riding a fixie represents "freedom from boredom".

"But sometimes when you see me riding, it's not because I'm happy, it's because I'm killing pain, anger, sadness," he says.

Fixie group rides vary in length and ambition, with some going "round island", taking in landmarks such as the striking red bridge at Lorong Halus, Yishun Dam, Lim Chu Kang cemetery, Jurong Point, Lau Pa Sat, Marina Bay Sands and East Coast Parkway.

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Besides feeling a sense of connection when cycling in a group, 17-year-old Kelvin (not his real name) says Zah and his other fixie-riding friends accept him for who he is.

"I can relate to their family issues. I had depression and anger management issues, but iLearn taught me to be patient."

"When there were things in the bike shop I could not do, it made me angry, but I had to find out what was wrong," says Kelvin, who is not on speaking terms with his divorced dad, with whom he lives.



Two other teens found role models at the iLearn programme.

ITE student Wei Xiong cut down on smoking after meeting national cyclist Calvin Sim, who won a gold at the 2017 South-east Asian Games.

"My mindset changed. He told me I have potential," says the 18-year-old, who dreams of making the national cycling team.

Razali (not his real name) asked to stay on to work on Fridays and weekends with Mr Melvin Lee, 54, owner of RNE Bike Shop in Bishan, one of two bicycle outfits in the iLearn scheme providing apprenticeships.



Mr Melvin Lee (left), owner of RNE Bike Shop, mentoring a participant who asked to stay on after the iLearn Social Workshop ended. The pilot project taught youth about repairing and maintaining different bicycles, and skills such as managing a shop. It also assigned them mentors. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

The 15-year-old, whose parents are divorced and who lives with his grandparents, prefers to learn hands-on. And he is picking things up fast, says Mr Lee, who signed up for iLearn because he wants to give back to society.

"When I look at these boys, I think of myself last time. I was playful and didn't like to study either. I liked to stay away from home," recalls Mr Lee, who has mentored other teens, teaching them about bikes about seven years ago.

Care Corner's Mr Chok hopes to run a second round of the iLearn project later this year, this time targeting teenage girls who may be at risk and who have an interest in the culinary arts or in learning the technical aspects of entertainment, such as working with sound and light.

## MP reaches out

On March 20, Mr Baey Yam Keng, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Transport, posted on his Facebook page that he had joined some youth on a night cycling expedition in the east.

While some of the fixie riders, most of whom are in secondary school, asked him if the Government would allow them to continue riding brakeless, they seemed to accept his explanation of the new rule, says the Member of Parliament for Tampines group representation constituency.



**Baey Yam Keng 马炎庆**

about 2 weeks ago



Felt young again on Friday evening, when I joined some youths for a night cycling expedition to the East!

A number of them use brakeless fixie bicycles regularly. I explained that for their safety, and that of other path and road users, all cyclists who ride on public paths and roads will need to install at least one handbrake on their bicycles, either on the front or back wheel of the bicycle. This will take effect from Sep 2021. A handbrake, which provides better control, w... [See More](#)



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Speaking to The Sunday Times in a Zoom interview, he says he might have mistaken these fixie riders for delinquents if he had not gone riding with them, as they were shouting to one another in a large group and playing music along the way.

"I think this group is often misunderstood," he says, adding that the teens were responsible, polite and "quite careful in the way they ride".

But he was aware that "not everything was done properly" as many of the riders wore dark clothes and had no night lights on.

While he urged the group to pay more attention to safety, he understands their adolescent proclivities: "We were all young once, we know we sometimes like to be cool and mysterious."

He hopes to work with such youth and has proposed activities such as a bike stunts competition.

Lauding their "ability to organise", through the use of 50-strong WhatsApp groups and apps that track one another's whereabouts, Mr Baey says: "When young people are very enthusiastic about something, they can put a lot of energy into it.

"In the right way, this can promote the sport in a safer, more responsible way."

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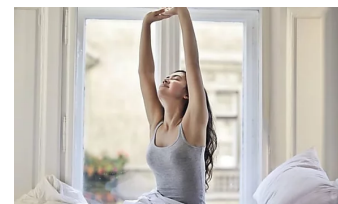
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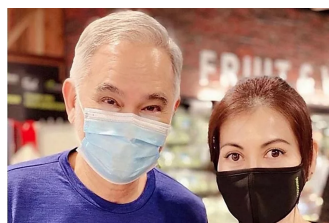


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