

FEATURE

# HEALING THROUGH MOUNTAIN BIKING



by **Dean Campbell**

## Building trails and riding them is fun. No question. But through the Aboriginal Youth Mountain Bike Program, those activities might affect positive change in some First Nations communities

**R**oughly five years ago, kids from First Nations community in Boothroyd, B.C., were tearing apart fences and excavating around the base of the fire hydrants in town. Officials in Boothroyd looked into where the wood and dirt were going. They discovered the kids were building structures and jumps to ride their bikes on. In too many First Nations communities, kids aren't able to direct their energy in healthy ways. Band leadership knew they had to find a way to help the youth get what they wanted, while keeping fences intact and fire hydrants firmly in the ground.

During meetings between band leadership and planning experts, the band manager Terrie Davidson leaned over to ask one of the community planners – Patrick Lucas – a question: "What do you know about mountain biking?"

Lucas, who was helping to create programs and facilities to improve the community, was a rider. He didn't, however, feel a strong enough connection to the mountain bike community to be able to offer qualified expertise. Recognizing the opportunity, he began to reach out and expand his network of contacts to professional trail builders, coaches and community builders. Lucas also reached out to the founder of the Sprockids program, Doug Detwiller, to discuss how his program might fit in with the First Nations communities where Lucas was working.

Detwiller is a retired teacher who had spent each Monday morning telling his students all about his weekend mountain biking or skiing. The kids loved it because it delayed the start of school work. They would encourage Detwiller to tell more stories. Quickly, he realized that his stories weren't just a way to delay the start of the day, but also ground upon which he could build a better relationship with his students. Detwiller got some of his more challenging students out on bikes and led them on rides.

"It was really great for the kids to go ride through mud and hoot and holler and not have anyone look at them funny," said Detwiller. "We were all just out having fun, and there was no judgment."

As the Sprockids program evolved throughout the 1990s, the focus was refined to address issues around self-esteem and anger management. "As you start climbing 'Anger Mountain,' we try to help kids recognize it as it's happening and then diffuse it – through mountain biking," said Detwiller. "It's a really powerful experience. With Sprockids, we've also been able to build trust and camaraderie."

Forget what you know about mountain bikes and what they're supposed to do. Close your eyes, and think about careening down a slope, splashing through a puddle, and then laughing as all your friends do the same. Imagine the hilarious looks of disgust on people's faces later in the day, people who have no idea how you got so messy and worn out. Meanwhile, you know that you're too tired to do anything but laugh some more. Now think about the bike you rode while doing this. Does it matter if it has a 1-by setup or dropper post? Is it any particular wheel size? Probably not. Probably, the bike you envisioned is like the you in your imagination, covered in mud. Maybe certain parts don't work, and maybe you and the bike have scars from previous days of slashing and crashing down the local trails.

"At one project, a kid showed up on this bike that was in pretty rough shape," said Detwiller. "The brakes didn't work, so he'd just drag his foot on the back tire to slow



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down. The front derailleur didn't work either, so he'd jump off before a climb and quickly move the chain by hand. "But none of that mattered to the kid. He was just out having a great time on a bike with his buddies."

These experiences are what hooks people on mountain biking. Freedom, speed, a little bit of recklessness and plenty of smiling friends joining in for the fun. For those already in the know, the hope is that these qualities are so infectious that they can help create new ardent fans of two-wheeled fun, rebuild communities and even provide direction and purpose to those who might otherwise lose their way.

When Lucas met Detwiller, the Sprockids program had a long-standing reputation for focusing on having fun on bikes, while also letting the kids help determine the shape of the program. It seemed like it could be an ideal fit for the communities Lucas worked with and so the pair planned a visit to Boothroyd to see what could be done.

"We walked around all day," recalled Detwiller, who felt demoralized throughout most of the day. "I felt like we'd accomplished nothing because we didn't have any firm plans. Patrick said, 'No, they've been accepting us into the community. It's been a really productive day.'"

Acceptance and a welcoming attitude have been key parts to what makes the program successful. Many development projects often struggle because wealthier individuals or groups bring in ideas that work in their own communities without considering how they might need to be adjusted to fit the community they're trying to help. Lucas had seen that first-hand while doing development work in Asia, and found the experience to be very formative in how he approaches the development projects in Canada.

"I was producing big, sexy reports and delivering them to communities thinking 'Here's an expensive doorstep,'" said Lucas. Even in Boothroyd, where there seemed to be a hunger for better facilities, there was concern that money might get wasted

building expensive facilities that would go unused.

"The kids wanted jumps and a pump track," said Lucas. "We got funding from a few sources including MEC and the Vancouver Foundation, and built a bike park."

One of the first signs that the project was going to work came on the first morning of the build, when Lucas arrived early to get things set up. "There were 15 kids sitting waiting for us to arrive so that we could get started," he said. "They ended up working two 10-hour days, back to back. That kind of engagement is unheard of. That project was a breakthrough for that community."

Success in Boothroyd came because of local involvement. The kids who helped with the build learned the necessary skills to maintain the bike park and to continue to do the work that keeps the park in good riding condition.

As Lucas and Detwiller started to work with more First Nations communities, they co-founded the Aboriginal Youth Mountain Bike Program in 2012. A non-profit and volunteer-driven project that builds on the work in Boothroyd, the AYMBP has worked with 15 First Nations communities in B.C. While the program is focused on youth, it can address other challenges pre-emptively. Much of the land in B.C. is unceded territory. Many treaties were never signed. As First Nations communities seek to get back control of their lands, access to trails built and used by what Lucas calls the

"settler" communities can fall into uncertainty.

"It's an issue I'd really like to get in front of," said Lucas. "If First Nations communities see the value in these trails, then there's greater potential for communities to get along and work together." The alternative could be protracted legal proceedings as territory agreements are hammered out in more formal settings. In the meantime, trails might deteriorate and communities could fall into conflict.

Relationships between First Nations and settler communities in Canada have a long and troubled history. Both Lucas and Detwiller have seen first-hand the devastating effects the residential school system has had: alienating children from their families and cultures, failing to provide adequate support for children forced into schools and exposing the children to abuse and even unethical experiments. In each community Lucas and Detwiller visit, that damage is front and centre. Often kids and mothers come out to help with projects, but few fathers do. Parents often know little about their own lands, or even about how to encourage their kids to play in a healthy way.

"It's hard to talk about it because people want to be so politically correct," said Detwiller. "But if we look at the reality of the residential schools programs, it's going to be generations before this will all get left to history."

"But with biking, we can include all members of a family, all members of a community. There's huge potential."

North of Kamloops, B.C., the Simpcw First Nation has



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worked with the AYMBP to develop a new opportunity for the band just as land-claim issues are also arising. Local Tom Eustache, along with his son and nephew, had been building trails in the area already. To Lucas, the trails were a little rough, but the three builders were keen to develop better routes. "We got funding for a trail and recreation plan that included the Valemount, Sun Peaks and part of Jasper," said Lucas.

"We had started building stuff on our own already, reclaiming decades-old walking trails," said Eustache, a member of the Simpcw Nation. "When Patrick showed up, he started pointing us in the right direction. We did some trail building workshops with members of the community and others from the valley."

The trail-building training has changed things dramatically, as Eustache, his son and his nephew have now started a trail-building business. Eustache serves as a councillor in the community and has been able to get funding to hire two trail crew members to maintain and build on the work that's already been done.

"There's opportunity to do stuff in the winter for cross-country skiing," said Eustache. "That could mean real, year-round jobs for members of our community, which is a big step."

"When I was young, I ended up working a lot, but never really had any reason to develop dreams for myself," said Eustache, whose parents were both alcoholics and had separated when he was young. Constantly taking jobs meant Eustache never got into too much trouble.

"In our community, I see how often kids get into drugs and drinking, and how limited opportunities are," said Eustache, whose own children are starting their careers. His daughter is working as a nurse, and his son has taken a trail-building job at Sun Peaks.

There are no illusions that trails will be a panacea for the issues First Nations communities face. However, at Simpcw, Eustache sees trails as a stepping stone toward greater things for his community.

"As a member of the band council, I focus on social and health programs. If we get families healthy, we can move up. That's where the focus on trails comes from," said Eustache. Not only are riders getting out on the trails, but a running group has emerged within the community and is out sharing trails with riders.

The potential for improving the health of First Nations communities is a big step, something Lucas and Detwiller see in the future of the AYMBP. The pair are also working to train ride leaders and guides who can offer more than just directions to visiting riders. "Mountain bikers want to do something unique," said Detwiller. "There are a lot of skills parks out there, but you need to have something more to stand apart. Having a guide who can tell me about the history of the region could be one option, but you really need to create a community and a scene."

Detwiller and Lucas are ambitious with their program. They hope it can be run in First Nations languages instead of English or French. They'd like to include public health departments to help work on the medical challenges particular to First Nations youth. As Lucas's proposals become more and more effective, he's also found that the work has become even more personally rewarding.

"By getting involved with First Nations and building communities, this work has solidified my identity as a Canadian," said Lucas. "If we want to become the country that Canada is supposed to be, we need to recognize that we were founded not just on English and French, but First Nations, too. We need to bring all of that together so First Nations and settlers can become the best we can be." 