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# Guy On A Bike: Minneapolis Pillsbury's Pedal Power

By [Guy Still](#) October 30, 2016 at 4:35 pm Filed Under: [Blogs](#), [Guy On A Bike](#), [Guy Still](#)



(credit: Guy Still)

Prior to meeting him, I had heard about Mark Trumper: A big man, full of intensity. I had previously pedaled past the column of bicycling pre-teens adorned in neon green hoodies while commuting to my home in northeast Minneapolis. But it wasn't until I had the chance to ride with the fourth and fifth graders of Minneapolis Pillsbury's cycling program that I really understood just how incredible Pedal Power is.

It was a cool and damp day in late October. A slow and steady rain had ceased only a few hours before school got out for the day and wet leaves littered the streets. Thirteen hearty students came out for the ride, a number much lower than the usual two dozen; a

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combination of weather, sickness and other factors. A few of the kids greeted me before the ride.



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All of the students ride a bike from a fleet the school owns, thanks to a handful of grants received over the years. Once bikes are distributed, kids cruise around the parking lot to make sure that everything is functioning properly. After that it's time to roll out.

"Pillsbury Pride," I shouted.

"Let's ride," the kids responded.

One student is appointed the caboose and rides at the back of the group. ELL teacher Mark Trumper and Art teacher Susan Tuck chaperone the kids, keeping an eye on traffic, teaching proper cycling behavior and making sure everything is running smoothly. I ride towards the rear, alongside Tuck, and watch a student in the middle of the pack go down in the street.



(credit: Guy Still)

"Rider down," a child shouts as the group rides past the boy who took the spill.

"That's our protocol," Tuck explains, and pedals up to check on the young man. He appears to be OK and wants to get back in the saddle, but she insists he take a moment to assess everything before going. He is fine. The ride continues.

I purposely rode my single speed, thinking there is no way the ride would take us up Norwegian Hill, a steep section of Saint Anthony Parkway that crests at the highest point in the city, Deming Heights Park. Of course, that is precisely where we went.



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“Use your gears and start gearing down BEFORE we get to the hill,” Trumper explained before we left the school.

Once we reached the summit, the group stopped and waited for everyone to make it. None of the kids dismounted and pushed their bikes up. I was impressed. The teachers explained that everyone needed to ride down the hill in control, feathering their brakes and ensuring a safe distance between one another. And the kids listened.

It quickly became apparent that Trumper and Tuck didn't baby these kids. Instead they challenged the students, thereby empowering them. In turn, the children took their responsibilities seriously: obeying traffic laws and looking out for one another.

Midway through the ride we stopped so the kids could get out off their bikes, wiggle around, grab a snack and socialize. I was impressed that this group of fourth and fifth graders, from different classes and ethnicities, didn't form cliques. Rather, they all played together having bonded over a common interest: cycling.

The Pedal Power Bike Program, now in its fifth year, is an after-school activity that runs from the start of the school year until Thanksgiving, or later depending on weather. It starts back up in the spring and culminates in a 28-mile ride out to Stillwater. Students ride every Monday and Wednesday for two hours, rain or shine. Trumper and Tuck recounted a ride last year where temperatures hovered in the mid-30s and the riders were pelted with sleet and cold rain. They were rewarded with a warm respite next to a bonfire at the halfway point.

Their passion for these kids was apparent as we talked about the program while the children munched on granola bars and hung from the jungle gym at Columbia Park. Approximately one-third of fourth graders at Pillsbury can't ride a bicycle, with even more not owning a two-wheeler. Trumper and Tuck work hard to change that, not only with this program but by partnering with [Free Bikes 4 Kidz](#) to ensure that all Pillsbury students who need a bike can get one.

The Pedal Power Program targets students who speak a language other than English at home. Often those children have less access to the city, with parents frequently working multiple jobs to make ends meet. “One of our big ideas is to show the students that Minneapolis is their city. They can access much of it with a bicycle,” Trumper explained in an email prior to our ride.

Parents have bought into the program as well. Trumper pointed out a couple of kids who have had two other siblings in the program. And when the ride was over, guardians were in the parking lot ready to bring their kids home, and offering to transport any others in need of a ride.

The Pedal Power Program is amazing on so many levels. It takes these kids to parts of the city they might not otherwise see, doing so with children they might not otherwise play with. But, it's so much more than that. It builds the character of these young men and women. One boy, who didn't speak at all when he started the program last year, approached me at the park and asked if I'd like a granola bar.

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I went out expecting to spend a couple of hours riding my bike for this blog. I left with a profound respect for two teachers who go above and beyond the call of duty by showing these children, many of whom are from first and second generation immigrant families, that they are respected and valued.



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