

POWER OF ELBOW GREASE



CARRIE GRACE HENDERSON REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

LARC students set up bicycles Friday to present to FISH after refurbishing them as a class project in Torrington.

Class makes old bikes like new for needy

BY CARRIE GRACE HENDERSON
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

TORRINGTON — Six smiling students presented 11 gleaming bicycles to the Friends of Service in Humanity on Friday.

The students had dismantled and refurbished the bikes as a class project.

"It takes a lot of guts to fix something," said James Dzurnak, a transition student at the Arc of Litchfield County. "It takes tender love and care to fix a bike, and not go to Wal-Mart and buy them."

The LARC Transition Program teaches students like Dzurnak with special needs between the ages of 18 and 21. But these students will never get to ride the bicycles they spent months sanding, painting and assembling.

All 11 bikes will be donated to FISH, a program designed to help individuals and families meet basic needs in

times of crisis.

Pamela Fritz, LARC Transitions Programs coordinator, said her all-male class has been working on the bikes since January.

"I end up trying to pry them away to get their other lessons done," Fritz said.

In the midst of buying new parts, spray painting and rebuilding the bikes, Fritz said her students learned "every skill imaginable."

They learned about the importance of safety goggles and how to work as a team, Fritz said. They also learned to follow directions and even used their math skills to decide which wrench to use.

"Don't tell them this is learning, though," Fritz said. "They just think they are having fun."

Students in the program work at neighborhood stores such as Petco and CVS, while getting classroom training in many subjects, including per-

sonal finance, safety and nutrition, LARC Director of Development Christian Emery said.

But their busy schedules don't stop them from being civic minded. Last year, during their annual outreach, students filled two 55-gallon drums with donated school supplies for a sister school in Jamaica.

LARC also partners with local nonprofits on a regular basis, Emery said.

"Every year we try to do community service projects to give them a sense of giving back to the community because the community is so good to them," Fritz said. "They need to understand that there is always someone worse off than them."

Students also saw how they could transform rusty, used bicycles into usable forms of transportation.

"How are you going to feel if you see someone riding one

of our bikes around town?" Fritz asked her class.

"Awesome!" they shouted.

Since her students are never shy about their accomplishments, Fritz said, they invited many people to the donation, including local politicians who spoke to the class before they registered to vote.

Fritz said her students grilled politicians on what they would do for the town if they were elected. Now, they get to show those same politicians how they give back.

Fritz let her students decide when they had perfected enough bikes to donate, and LARC is still accepting community donations. Because of the success of the program, Fritz said her students will work on the project again next year.

"They come home with greasy pants, but they are so proud of themselves," Fritz said.