



RECYCLE-A-BIKE

is a London based non-profit that was started to help mental health patients learn new work and social skills. It now does more good work than seems possible for one small organisation. We met its founder, **Nick Gore**, to find out how they do it

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Trying to sum up the Recycle-A-Bike project is very difficult. There are so many aspects to the good work that they do that it's hard to know where to start. If there's another bike charity in the world that achieves so much with so little, we certainly haven't heard of it.

We'll start, then, at the beginning. Nick Gore (pictured right) is a lifelong cyclist. He works as a personal fitness trainer for the NHS, in the Central and North-West London Mental Health Trust, helping patients suffering with mental illnesses such as bi-polar disorder and schizophrenia to improve their fitness and, with it, their confidence and independence.

In 2007 Nick started a cycling group for patients who were keen to gain both fitness and independent transport to get to support groups and collect medication. Nick sourced and fixed up some unwanted bikes for those without the means to buy their own and gave them advice on basic

maintenance to keep the bikes going. The group gained momentum and by the end of that year Nick opened the Recycle-A-Bike workshop to refurbish more bikes and work with his patients.

"It works so well at building skills, confidence, social inclusion and at breaking down the stigma of mental health issues," Nick tells us. "It began with fitness and soon became about



giving people skills for life and new chances of employment. Most are on benefits and, unfortunately, have few qualifications but they do want a way out of that."

AND SO TO WORK

Still working full-time, Nick used his weekends, evenings and even his lunch hours to get RAB off the ground. The initiative really hit its stride with help from the Capital Volunteer scheme which offers funding for projects which provide training to unemployed volunteers with the goal of making them more employable.

"The focus is now on helping [mental health] service users to gain qualifications," explains Nick. "We've had four people achieve Cytech bike mechanic qualifications so far and two with City and Guilds."

Some other local bike shops, to their great credit, support RAB rather than viewing them as rivals. "We've actually placed trainees in other shops," says Nick, "and one offers a minimum £40 trade-in against a new bike and then gives us the old bikes." 🚲





“I’VE SEEN MASSIVE CHANGES IN PEOPLE. YOU SEE THEM INTERACTING WITH CUSTOMERS AND IT’S BRILLIANT”



“We did a deal with a local firm to sandblast and powder coat a batch of framesets. The colour is a grey powder blend that’s scraped out of the bottom of the machines and would otherwise be thrown away.” This ingenuity means the frames can be given a tough new powder coat finish really cheaply. It helps the sprayers and the environment, and the varying dregs of powder coat create interesting tones that make every RAB Roadster slightly different. The frames are built up with all new parts and prices start from £250. From humble beginnings, the Recycle-A-Bike shop is now respected by the area’s cyclists. “People used to haggle over a £30 service,” Nick recalls, “but now customers bring in high-end road and mountain bikes and we have lots of regulars.”



Top left Nick and his team of volunteers are quietly proud of RAB’s success but seek no recognition for their work; they deserve it, though – they’re champions

Left Volunteers learn bike mechanics at the same time as refurbishing old bikes to be resold

Far left The RAB Roadster is their own custom creation with a signature grey colour made of recycled leftover powder coat paint

Below The new workshop is bright and well appointed, thanks to six months of hard work by the team of volunteers... and their MP

Of all the challenges facing a project such as this, finding enough old bikes to refurbish is not one of them. The yard behind their workshop has salvaged bikes piled up.

“It’s amazing what people are prepared to throw away these days,” says Nick. “There’s this disposable mentality, and it’s often just to make room in their shed. One guy brought in this beautiful old lugged steel Holdsworth and it even had a lovely Brooks saddle fitted to it. All it really needed was a refurb but he was like ‘Would you like it? Because otherwise it’s going to the tip.’ Too right, we wanted it!”

Where possible, bikes are restored to something resembling original condition but everything is put to use. The RAB Roadster is their signature model in every respect. Custom built from whatever frame is on hand to refurbish, even the colour is recycled.



NICK AND HIS TEAM COMPLETELY REFURBISHED THIS OLD FIRE STATION. ALONG WITH PEOPLE AND BIKES, HE CAN NOW ADD BUILDINGS TO THE LIST OF THINGS HE’S SAVED

One key difference from other shops, though, is that RAB remains a non-profit and whatever money it makes is reinvested in the shop and training for volunteers, including health and safety and first aid, as well as bike mechanics.

“We have six to 10 volunteers here every day. They don’t need care, just a bit of support and motivation,” Nick explains. “For instance, if you don’t give them something to do they might just sit in the corner quietly, so you get them up and involved and get them working on something.”

“I’ve seen massive changes in people. You see them interacting with customers and it’s brilliant.”

THE BUILDING

This summer, Recycle-A-Bike moved into a fantastic new premises, the Old Fire Station in the centre of Uxbridge, and it’s yet another great chapter to the story. Located behind a big department store, it was sat empty and brought to Nick’s attention by a friend. Nick then discovered that it’s owned by Sir John Randall, the MP for Uxbridge and South Ruislip. Without any form of introduction, Nick wrote to Randall and was invited to discuss the project. “He asked me to submit a business plan, which I did, and he



went for it,” says Nick. “He really liked all the elements, the mental health aspect, getting people back to work, adding a bike shop to the area, promoting cycling in the borough...”

In fact, Randall liked the project so much that he allowed RAB to occupy the building rent-free. Over the next six months, Nick and his volunteers completely refurbished the beautiful Old Fire Station into what you see in these photos. Along with people and bikes, Nick can now add buildings to the list of things he’s saved.

BRANCHING OUT

Although it sounds like Nick already has a huge amount of work to handle, he is always looking for any new opportunities to cooperate with other



Top Proud RAB volunteers outside their recently opened new base in the Old Fire Station, Uxbridge

Above The yard out the back of their workshop is rammed full of bikes waiting to be revived



schemes and businesses, and he’s set up some fruitful collaborations.

The most perfectly symbiotic of them is with nearby Brunel University. “They’re keen to encourage bike use and we first got involved through Freshers’ Week,” says Nick. “We’d sell very cheap bikes – £30 or so – to the arriving students. Then we started helping a few foreign students cope with riding over here; some of them don’t even know which side of the road they should be riding on!”



THIS ONE RUNS ON MONEY AND MAKES YOU FAT

THIS ONE RUNS ON FAT AND SERVES YOU MONEY

“INSTEAD OF THROWING AWAY THE DOZENS OF BIKES ABANDONED BY STUDENTS WHEN THEY GO HOME, THE UNIVERSITY PASS THEM TO US TO REFURB AND RE-SELL”



“After that we also got involved with their Green Week and some staff events. Now, instead of throwing away the dozens of bikes abandoned by students when they go home at the end of the year, the university pass them to us to refurb and re-sell.” It’s a perfect circle.

RAB have also been approached by local schools to run Bike Ability courses and by the Met Police and Transport for London to help deliver a scheme to loan out refurbished stolen-recovered bikes to people who relied on a bike that has been stolen. “So far we’ve only done eight bikes for them,” says Nick. “The bikes they brought us had been selected from their lock-up for their brand and not their condition. They needed so many parts replacing that it tore through their budget in one go. It has potential, though.”

THE SIR CHRIS HOY STORY

One of RAB’s happiest ever customers came to them through the strangest chain of events, as Nick recounts:

Above The RAB shop now has a healthy stock of great looking bikes

Below Some bikes deserve to be hung on walls rather than stripped and rebuilt

“He came to us all the way from King’s Lynn, in Norfolk, a three-hour drive each way. He was overweight and he’d seen Sir Chris Hoy on TV saying how he was getting his dad into cycling to help him lose weight. So this guy calls Chris Hoy - I’ve no idea how he got a number - and actually gets straight through to him and asks him what bike he should get and so on. Chris gave him a load of his time and some advice and got his PA to help. The PA referred him to us, though we don’t know how she found us. So then he phones us and asks if we can help, and we say ‘Of course we

can’. It was only when he arrived that we realised how far he’d travelled to get to us.

“He needed a very sturdy bike so we took a Decathlon mountain bike frame and fitted a strong touring fork and wheelset. He had no idea how to work the gears or anything, so we had him riding up and down a side road while we taught him. He called us when he got home and couldn’t thank us enough.”

SUCCESSES AND THE FUTURE

Their next plan is to open a cycle café and a staffed secure bike parking facility for city commuters who don’t want to risk leaving their bike at the train station 300m away.

But for all their good initiatives it’s important we remember that this project is first and foremost about helping people who are unwell. Chief ambassador for RAB’s great work in this area is their star graduate. A long-term mental health service user, this individual spent two years working and training with Nick, then left and became an ambulance driver. “In the mental health service it’s almost unheard of for someone to return to work full-time,” says Nick.

While clearly proud of RAB and the people that volunteer with him, Nick is incredibly humble, to the extent that it seems he’s unaware of how highly regarded his efforts are. He sums it up as, “just loads of people that love cycling and the good work and it’s a really good vibe.”

Visit www.recycleabike.co.uk

