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Training Wheels

15 March 2011, by Marie-Charlotte Pez 

The first time I met Willem Estela, he scared me half to death. His dark, furrowed brow and deeply-chiseled face, evocative of his south-american heritage, reminded me of my father when he was angry: "You can't leave your bike unlocked on the street!" he warned, emphatically - and with good cause, because Willem feels responsible for bicycles. More than two years ago he was sent to the Recycle Bike Repair Shop by his social worker, after a leg injury prevented him from holding a real job, and a fight-gone-wrong landed him in jail.



Photo by [Karlotta Studios](#)

Recycle, helmed by the Roads foundation, is part of a government-funded programme to keep people off the streets. Rehabilitated drugs addicts, mental patients and probationers like Estela benefit not only from the job skills they acquire during their apprenticeships (and the stipend they get for their work), but also from socialisation and structure.

"Loneliness is the fast track to falling further down," says Eric Alders, supervisor at Recycle. Alders, who has a background both in mechanics and social work, works with a regular crew of 10 to 20 programme participants, who for the most part have psychiatric or drug addiction issues. "It's not always easy, but I love my job. I get to help people." But, as Estela says, "you also have to be willing to help yourself."

Recycle's approach is to teach their prot g s motivation in the heavily supervised work environment. "Some of them need a buddy; some need a boss; and sometimes what they really need is a mirror," says Alders. It is not unlike cognitive therapy, as some individuals' behaviour has to be re-trained to help their reintegration process. "I first hand them a bike wheel, and see how they do," says Alders. "When we see progress and motivation, we move on to the rest of the bike."

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They also provide a hearty lunch, "because some don't have enough to get a meal." A large pot of chili sits on the convivial table in the break room, surrounded by damaged yet smiling faces, and where a real feeling of cohesion and camaraderie reigns.

"Learning is important," says Moustafa Elkhashab, another participant; "it connects you to the world, it helps you understand other people." In his two years at Recycle, Alders has only seen the experiment fail twice. "Some people just can't be rehabilitated. One of our participants simply wanted to go back to jail, where life seemed less complicated."

Most of Alders' prot g s get active help from the organisation in finding job placement and other integration opportunities at the end of their apprenticeship. Estela, who is proud to be a "workaholic," is very grateful because Recycle is assisting him in finding an apartment. "They helped me a lot, I didn't think I'd get this far. They made calls for me, and now I'm going to have my own home." According to Alders, "the success of the initiative has shown that money is better invested keeping offenders off the streets through rehabilitation rather than filling up prisons and mental health institutions."

Unfortunately, Recycle is threatened by nationwide 435 million euros budget cuts in social work and initiatives, so to help Recycle survive, why not bring them your bike when it is in need of some TLC? It may take a day or two to get your wheels back, but they do quality, inexpensive work and somehow give your bike more heart. Their motto: "Rather than steal it, why don't we repair it, or pimp it?" And lock it, for crying out loud, or Estela will remind you with his booming voice.

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Open Mon-Thur 9am-4pm, Fri 9am-12pm*

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