

Riders with a Cause

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Do you worry about the current state and future of our planet, or humanity? Are you one of those people who is scared by Al Gore's vision of the world, but isn't sure what to do about it? The Otesha Project may be able to help you.

"The Otesha project is a youth-run organisation that uses theatre to mobilize people to create local and global change through their everyday consumer choices," reads their mission statement; but what does it mean? For Kaela Stradiotto, a second year Social Justice and Peace/Women's Studies student at King's University College, it meant a summer of exercise and fun, riding through the Maritimes and putting on plays.

Beginning with a cross-Canada theatrical bicycle expedition in 2003, the Otesha project has since been sending out smaller two month regional bike tours. This way its volunteers reach a more varied audience by stopping more frequently and not waiting until they get to the major cities to put on their show. They perform a multimedia play that has been handed down to each Otesha group by previous members, and aims to teach grade school children about how the choices they make in their daily morning routines can effect the planet and global community. Choices involving water, clothing, media, coffee, food and transport are all reflected back to the audience.

While each bike group reworks and rewrites the play to its own tastes, the general themes and statistics involved remain the same. For example, volunteers demonstrate how simple morning bathroom habits can be altered to save 120 litres of water each day, but the scenario presented may be different each time.

Stradiotto's play, in which the characters' choices allowed them to become superheroes, was generally well received, especially by younger audience members who compared it favourably with the Transformers movie. To date, Otesha performances have reached over 60,000 people.

Stradiotto's summer excursion began with a love of being active in the outdoors and a desire to help. "It combined all of the things I wanted to do. We were living in tune with the message we were spreading [...] I wanted to live in a community and I wanted to visit all types of provincial parks and cities," says Stradiotto. "To be really cliché, I wanted to be the change I want to see in the world, and be doing that through theatre especially." Would-be volunteers that are at least 18 years old can sign up for a bike tour as she did, on the project's informative website (www.otesha.ca). The site boasts that over 85 young people participated in five tours (taking place mostly in the spring and summer) across Canada in 2007. In December signup will begin for seven 2008 tours.

Once a spot is confirmed volunteers must raise \$1900, to cover general supplies (other than biking and personal gear) as well as a week's training session, food budget and the support vehicle that accompanies many of the teams. Scholarships can also be applied for

on a first-come, first-served basis to cover this cost, but generally raising the money is meant to be part of the experience, says Stradiotto.

For those who believe merely showing others positive actions that they could be taking is not enough, Otesha's policy is to "walk the talk". It says so in every volunteer's Otesha book, which itself is a perfect example. Each book, which contains the basic play as well as other information and experiences from past Otesha Members, is made of used materials and printed by Warren's Waterless in Toronto, using an environmentally sound printing process. On tour volunteers aim to wear, eat, drink and act in accordance with their own teachings. "The truth is, we all have to live in this world and we do what we need to survive. The trick is to always keep questioning, keep finding new and more sustainable ways of living, because they are out there," says Stradiotto.

The project itself was born five years ago in Kenya, when Jocelyn Land-Murphy and Jessica Lax, two 21-year-old Canadian students studying sustainable development, met in a place where living conditions contrasted sharply with those of their North American upbringing. The women found positive ways to curb the excesses of their home country, bringing their ideas back to Canada and naming them Otesha, which means "reason to dream" in Swahili.

Since then, the Otesha Project has provided many people with straight-forward information about how they can help to heal the world through their everyday choices, as well as provided an outlet for energetic, creative young philanthropists like Stradiotto to share that message, while watching change take shape.

"We got some kind of instant gratification. Other [people] who had seen the play would tell us 'Oh, I took a staggered shower today,' or 'I'm going to eat more local food,' and be really excited about it."

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