

*“Growing up, I was not allowed
to own or ride a bike.
Nor was I allowed to
play outside.”*





BY OMAR BHIMJI

MOST PRESENTATIONS GIVEN by the Otesha Project start with a history of the organization's name. Otesha, loosely translated, means reason to dream in Swahili, the native language of Kenya, where the project was first conceived. From an idea that was born in East Africa, Otesha morphed first into a cross-Canada bike tour, then into a number of different programs, and is now a multi-faceted, Ottawa-based organization that works to empower today's youth to change the world through their choices and actions. **MOMENTUM** caught up with Jessica Lax and Jocelyn Murphy, the Project's founders, in the spring of 2007 as Otesha was gearing up for its busiest summer to date.

Riding on hope

2007 OTESHA BIKE TOURS:

SUNSHINE COAST/VANCOUVER ISLAND TOUR:

MAY 1 – JUNE 30

ROCKY MOUNTAIN TOUR: MAY 1 – JUNE 30

EAST COAST TOUR: JULY 1 – AUGUST 31

MARITIME TOUR: JULY 1 – AUGUST 31

LAKE SUPERIOR TOUR: AUGUST 19 – OCTOBER 19

For more information, or to download "The Otesha Book" in PDF format, visit www.otesha.ca. Also available in PDF is a manual for high school teachers.

In the summer of 2003, the first Otesha bike tour saw 25 volunteers ride from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Cornerbrook, Newfoundland, over the course of six months. On their way, they stopped at schools, summer camps, community centres – anywhere they could find a young audience – to give presentations. The medium was ever-evolving, incorporating skits, workshops, interactive games, discussion groups, etc. but the message was always the same: that youth have the future in their hands. That, by living their lives according to their values and vision for the world – walking the talk, in Otesha speak – young people have the chance to create the world they wish to live in.

A great responsibility, to be sure, but also a great power. And showing youth the power they have to make a difference in the world is at the centre of everything Otesha does. The presentations focus on how to make a difference through your everyday actions, whether it be supporting worker's rights by drinking fair trade coffee; respecting water by turning off the tap when you brush; choosing to ride your bike; going vegetarian; or making your own clothes, if that speaks to your values. Presentations are given by youth volunteers, either during the summer bike tours or during the year by members of the Triple H (High school Hopeful Hooligan) program, which helps students organize projects and events to empower their community and peers. The bike tours bring Otesha's message of hope and empowerment to communities across the country while simultaneously inspiring people with their epic scope: self-propelled across Canada in search of reasons to dream of a better future.

While 2003 and 2005 saw groups of Hopeful Hooligans travelling across the country, this summer the tour program is comprised of five regional tours, two-month bike trips that will focus on specific, strategic areas. Past tour members who were surveyed after four tours in the summer of 2005, felt that a six-month tour was simply too much of a good thing. Their experience suggested that smaller tours in denser areas would give participants most of the benefits of an epic cross-Canada ride while allowing them to do just as much during a shorter period of time, as well as being much easier to plan and implement.

This refocusing is perhaps the most visible aspect of a greater change that Otesha is undergoing. It is a carefully-planned process that will dramatically alter the nature of the project and, according to its founders, offer a new vision of how non-profits can operate.

Having tired of the grant-for-project cycle that has funded their activities, and with a wealth of feedback and experience running their programs, Otesha staff put together an ambitious five-year plan that would see the project become financially self-sufficient by 2011, while doubling its program offerings.

The five-year plan calls for almost every aspect of the organization to be reconsidered. Rather than reinventing the wheel every time a tour needed to be planned, staff put together a tour toolbox, a template that would

facilitate the planning of future tours. Instead of looking for funding to pay for volunteer expenses, Otesha established a fundraising program to help tour members fund their own bike trips. A book was written and published to spread Otesha's message beyond the scope of the presentations. The Triple H program was started to give youth who wanted to take action a platform from which to do so. Tours have become more horizontal, with members being encouraged to take on more responsibility for the direction and focus of the tours. The concept of laddering is now embraced at every level of the organization: instead of new staff having to be hired and brought in cold, people can be introduced to Otesha in various ways and invited to take an active role in the project's work.

Already, the laddering philosophy has started to bear fruit. Many of the members of this year's tours have seen an Otesha presentation at some point, and were inspired to join up. Kristina Hunter, who was in the audience at one of Otesha's first presentations, joined the Great Lakes tour in 2005, and this summer is working as an intern at Otesha's Ottawa office, helping to put together the same tours that spoke to her in the first place.

The five-year plan doesn't represent a change or departure for Otesha, but rather a crystallization of its original path. As founder Jessica Lax notes, "The goals have changed very little – there's just a lot more to do!" Many different models and conversations inspired the plan, which required a lot of careful planning, monitoring, and up-front funding. But the opportunity to become independent and self-sufficient was too good to pass up. For a group working towards a sustainable future, organizational sustainability – both financial and structural – is a natural and complementary goal.

Now, in its second year of implementation, Otesha is already well ahead of schedule. The process is being

heavily monitored and documented. A number of other organizations have read the plan, drawn inspiration from it, and are waiting to see how it goes. While it probably couldn't be replicated, many of the lessons and ideas incorporated into the five-year plan could prove instructive to other organizations seeking to escape the usual NGO pitfalls. With an eye on the bigger picture, the prospect of helping their allies in the not-for-profit world further motivates Otesha's staff to succeed on their path. As founder Jocelyn Murphy sees it, "To succeed as a movement, (NGOs) need to find an alternative to the "funder" model."

Between the two of them, Jess and Jocelyn have probably explained the meaning and origin of the word Otesha a thousand times. But what does Otesha mean to them? "When we first came up with the name in Kenya, it reflected our belief that, in spite of all the problems we face, an alternative future is possible," explains Jessica. "Now, it carries with it all that the organization has achieved over the past five years." The accomplishments, the lessons learned, the people it has touched, inspired and been inspired by – all these things make up Otesha and imbue it with meaning. As Jess sees it, "They have become our reasons to dream."



"...many of the lessons and ideas incorporated into [Otesha's] five year plan could prove instructive to other organizations seeking to escape the usual NGO pitfalls."