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Otesha seeks cyclists

by Sam VanSchie

Five years ago two Canadians met in Kenya with a common goal: tell as many young people as possible about how their daily choices make a difference on a global scale.



Provided photo

They started Otesha (Kiswahili for "reason to dream"), a non-profit, youth-run organization based in Ottawa that facilitates communities of cyclists who bike between Canadian cities in making presentations to youth about sustainability.

With hundreds of past participants and many tours coming up, what started as a simple idea has become an impressive initiative.

"It's really blossomed into this amazing entity that's taking Canada by storm," co-founder Jessica Lax said from Ottawa.

Now in their third round of bike tours, the group is recruiting up to 100 ambitious 18- to 30-year-olds as volunteer cyclists or driving interns. And you don't have to be a hardcore cyclist or activist to get involved.

"Basically, anyone who shows a passion for cycling, sustainability and getting youth involved in taking actions are people we want to bring on this tour," said Lax. "I started biking across Canada before I biked much further then to the store."

While Otesha isn't planning any five-month "epic journeys" across Canada right now, Lax fondly remembered cycling from Vancouver to Cornerbrook, Nfld. with 32 others in 2003.

"It was one of the most intense communities I've ever been a part of, and also one of the most rewarding," she said. "Of the 100 bike tour people I know who have gone through the experience, almost all of them will tell you it's the best experience of their life."

The 8,600-kilometre trip was repeated in 2005 along with three shorter regional tours. This year there will be five two-month regional tours, including two that start in Vancouver. One of those trips goes west to the Sunshine Coast, and another heads east to the Rocky Mountains.

Lax pointed out that the shorter trips allow more people to be involved and are more conducive to students who may need to work a few months in the summer. She also said participants will be able to offer more to the team for a shorter period and then go home and rest, avoiding the "definite burnout factor of longer trips."

Cyclists are responsible for providing \$1,900 toward their trip, which can be

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earned through fundraising or by applying to the group's scholarship pool.

Major sponsors and the kindness of strangers are also key to the success of Otesha.

"None of this could happen without volunteers and people across Canada who lend us their backyards to sleep in or make potluck food for us," said Lax. "It's amazing, the generosity of Canadians as we bike across."