

iCan Bike Alpharetta for special-needs kids is ‘labor of love’



Caption

Credit: AJC

Inspire Atlanta

By Laura Berrios, For the AJC

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Thirteen-year-old Louis Eaton learned to ride a bicycle at the iCan Bike Alpharetta camp this summer, and now his mother, Kimberly, can look forward to family bike rides, a long-held dream of hers.

Making this happen wasn't easy.

It took a mother's heart, a community of volunteers and two Alpharetta police officers who spent eight months preparing for the special-needs summer camp.

The international charitable nonprofit iCan Shine operates bike camps and similar swimming and dance camps for people with disabilities. The host site takes care of all the details, including financing.

Louis was one of 45 campers at the Alpharetta program, which had a waiting list twice as long. His mother gladly made the 1 1/2-hour drive from Henry County every morning because, as she explained: “We’ll do [anything] for our kids. Louis is the heart and soul of our family.”

Caption



Credit: AJC

Alpharetta Police Department Bike Patrol Unit officers Amanda Clay and Allen Elfretth have hosted the camp for the past eight years. When they’re not doing their regular jobs patrolling city streets, large neighborhoods and parks, they organize all the pre-camp details, including recruiting volunteers and gathering donations to cover \$10,000 in expenses.

“It’s a labor of love,” said Clay, who has been on the bike patrol unit since 2013.

The five-day camp includes 75-minute rotating sessions of eight riders working with iCan Shine technicians. Campers begin by riding a unique adaptive bike on an indoor skating rink at The Cooler/ Alpharetta Family Skate Center. Two volunteers run beside each biker, assisting them as needed. Midweek, camp is moved outside to the parking lot. Volunteers swap in and out as Georgia's summer heat takes a toll.

Caption



Credit: AJC

The bike camp wouldn't happen without community support. For example, The Cooler donates space, local restaurants cater lunches for the volunteers and other city departments get involved, such as the fire department and recreation and parks. In addition, all eight bike patrol officers pitch in to ensure operations run smoothly.

Volunteers come from local businesses, scout troops and service groups. Some volunteers return each year. For example, Kayla Morris and Alexis Poole have been helping at iCan Bike Alpharetta for 14 years. Kayla's mom ran the camp in the early years, and Alexis's dad was a volunteer, so the girls tagged along with their parents, became friends and have been loyal to the program ever since. Both said they love working with kids and seeing their confidence grow throughout the week.

Caption



Credit: AJC

The goal is for every camper to ride a two-wheeler without assistance by the end of the week, and the iCan Shine organization boasts an 80% success rate. For the special-needs population, riding a bicycle can mean freedom and maybe even employment, as a way to get to work, says Clay.

Twelve-year-old Lucy Genske of Alpharetta left camp almost ready to ride by herself. She'll need a little more practice and help from her parents, Greg and Leslie Genske. The Genskes said because their daughter struggles with balance, they could not have taught her how to ride a bicycle. The iCan Bike system of gradually moving toward a standard two-wheeler made it easier.

Officers Clay and Elfretth have been bike patrol partners since 2013, taking on many Alpharetta community service projects as part of their jobs. The officers also collect used bicycles

throughout the year to be refurbished and given as Christmas gifts by volunteers with Bikes for Kids Alpharetta.

“It’s a natural extension of what we do,” said Clay. “We’re already out in the community.”

Caption



Credit: AJC

The two officers inadvertently stumbled across this camp about 10 years ago and decided to volunteer. After the second year as volunteers, the Alpharetta hosts at the time said they could no longer continue the program and asked the bike patrol unit to take charge and keep it going.

“We talked it over and said yes and haven’t looked back since. It’s been a wonderful ride,” Clay said.

“It’s so rewarding,” agrees Elfreth. “When we started helping, I saw how excited the kids would get. I’m a parent, and I couldn’t imagine a scene where kids are all playing together in the cul-de-sac, and everyone jumps on their bike, but your kid can’t.”

Caption



Credit: AJC

On the last day of camp, parents run alongside their child to help steady a wobbly bike before it falls or encourage them to look straight ahead and keep pedaling. It's an essential step before campers leave so they can keep riding their bikes and improving.

Eaton couldn't run fast enough to keep up with her son. Louis pedaled out of her reach, face filled with glee.

MORE DETAILS

iCan Shine is committed to offering a variety of programs to enrich the lives of people with disabilities.

Learn more about iCan Bike, iCan Dance, iCan Swim camps and locations at <https://icanshine.org/>

Caption

