

LIFESTYLE

# How a community rolls

BY VINCENT T. DAVIS, STAFF WRITER : JULY 29, 2013 : Updated: July 31, 2013 8:55am



Photo By Photo by Darren Abate/Express-News

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Cyclists prepare for a bicycle ride organized by Roll Models and the San Antonio Housing Authority, Saturday, July 13, 2013, in San Antonio. Roll Models is a program that helps kids and families bike to areas outside of their own neighborhoods. (Darren Abate/For the Express-News)

On a recent muggy Saturday morning, 125 bicyclists rode from downtown to Mission San José as part of an initiative that promotes health and wellness for [San Antonio Housing Authority](#) residents and others in the city.

Riders from age 6 to 70 met in the parking lot of the SAHA central office on South Flores Street for the program's third monthly bike tour. Some rode bikes that were sleek and new; some rode bikes made from spare parts. One bike was built for two, and one was a customized, stretched cycle with high-reaching, Harley-Davidson-style handle bars. And several rode bikes that pulled two-wheeled, mesh-covered trailers with children curled inside.

Around 9 a.m., SAHA sustainability liaison [Beth Keel](#) rounded the riders into place for the 4 1/2 mile ride to Mission San José.

“This gives everyone a great opportunity to get to know each other, no matter where you come from,”

Keel said. "It's a way for everyone to be outside of their neighborhoods together."

The program, planned by SAHA, encourages residents to use bicycles as a mode of transportation and emphasizes exercise to help reduce obesity in San Antonio. Organizers said the monthly program, endorsed by the Mayor's [Fitness Council](#), is rolling thanks to donations from participants and volunteers.

The first ride took place in May with 45 cyclists riding from Alazan-Apache Courts to Woodlawn Lake. Keel said the numbers of riders has grown each month. Riders average 8 to 10 miles on each ride.

Keel said one of the program's goals is to stop in every ZIP code in San Antonio and try to get as many residents involved as possible.

She said it takes two months to plan each route and, when possible, planners include stops at B-cycle bike-share stations, where people can rent bikes for the day.

Volunteers drive passenger vans and trucks to carry bikes and bikers who can't complete the route, get a flat tire or have some other mechanical malfunction. A street team helps riders through red lights and tries to keep them in marked bike lanes.

The rides have drawn support from the San Antonio bike community. Mingled among the crowd at the recent event were folks from groups such as the Wild Dawgs, SATX Pedal Power, and PoPo's We-Cycle, a nonprofit that recycles old bikes. [Eric Cerda](#), founder of We-Cycle said the event makes a statement about biking in the city.

"We do it for the kids, that's the biggest thing," Cerda said. "We try to get SAHA residents to get their kids out here and take them to places they haven't been to in San Antonio."

The procession rolled behind [Dante Jones](#), founder of a youth biking group called Roll Models. He pedaled onto West Guenther Street, pulling a trailer with a boom box blaring funky beats. They headed south from SAHA's central office to Mission Concepción for a 30-minute water break, with a few of their dogs trotting along. Then they rolled onto Mission Road, stopping at Mission San José for a cultural presentation.

During one stop, Jones said he created his group (whose name stands for Respect, Obedience, Love and Leadership) to teach life lessons and life skills to kids 5 to 18.

Jones said he passes on lessons about riding bikes learned from his dad in Indianapolis — including the importance of wearing safety helmets, hand commands, formations and staying focused.

He said the kids always push themselves to complete their routes.

"They never give up," Jones said. "And (always) stay with the group."

Jones said the youngsters also take note of their changing surroundings.

"They generally notice the demographics," Jones said. "They'll mention the different races and realize we're all the same people."

After reaching the mission, the riders snacked on bananas, oranges and gulped bottles of Gatorade. A park ranger welcomed them, and led them inside the compound, where they parked their bikes and stood in the shade of two sprawling mesquite trees listening to the San Antonio River Mission Descendants talk about the families that lived in the South Side area centuries ago.

Keel said she arranged the presentation to help the local kids understand where they come from.

“Some of the kids' families go back generations,” she said. “It's a way to be reintroduced to their roots.”

One rider, Judit Vega, said being outside and interacting with other people was a unique experience for her children.

“There's too many kids inside watching TV for hours,” Vega said. “For my kids, it's important to see a sense of community; to see kids out on bikes together is very inclusive.”

Jose and Crystal Baez read about the event on Facebook and brought their children, Nathaniel and Natalie, for the family's first visit to a San Antonio mission.

“This is a treat,” [Jose Baez](#) said. “We've never been here; we thought it would be great for the kids to see. It was a plus, a big plus.”

The next monthly ride is scheduled for Aug. 17 at Brackenridge Park. For information, call 210-477-6242 or email [beth\\_keel@saha.org](mailto:beth_keel@saha.org)

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