

# Biking Into a Better World

Young People Find Responsibility, Health, Fitness and Lasting Friendship Through El Grupo

By Lisa K. Harris



El Group team member Donovan Caputo and Coach Ignacio Rivera de Rosales joke moments before the 109 mile El Tour ride begins. Photo by Kathleen Dreier.

“Without El Grupo, I’d be sitting around playing video games,” said Nathan Franklin, 17, a member of the teen riding club. If it wasn’t for the supportive atmosphere Ignacio Rivera de Rosales and his wife Daniela Diamente have created in the club, his past habits of fighting with his parents and being bored out of his wits at school probably would have continued.

“Being in El Grupo makes me look forward to school,” Franklin, a senior at City High School said. “My mind works faster now and I have somewhere to release my extra energy.”

Ignacio, who works full-time for Pima County’s Safe Routes to School Program, believes in the power of bicycling. “What a difference riding can make,” he said. “Not only can riding help solve the obesity problem we see in kids today, but it can create an open society where we know our neighbors.”

El Grupo does both and more.

Ignacio, head coach, and Daniela, program director, have created a cohesive unit with a group of low-income, underserved kids from different middle schools and high schools that typically wouldn’t have gotten involved with team sports, let alone with each other.

Franklin had never participated in a regular exercise program before meeting Ignacio.

“He came to my school with a mountain bike and I thought it was the coolest thing,” he said. After talking with Ignacio, and hanging out at the team’s clubhouse, an office suite in the refurbished old Firestone Tire building at the corner of 6th Avenue and 6th Street, Franklin was hooked. “I lost 20 pounds in my first month,” he said. He also made a set of friends that he’ll probably have the rest of his life.

“I look for kids who are eager to ride but because of life’s circumstances may not be able to afford a bike,” Ignacio said. “We support the kids anyway we can with bikes, jerseys, coaching.” And, according to Kathleen Dreier, mother of team member Logan Boyd, with parenting.

“Ignacio is such a positive role model,” Dreier, said, that she often casts El Grupo into the role of a co-parent. “I’ve

used Ignacio to talk to Logan when I’ve needed help.”

El Grupo currently consists of 17 teens, ages 12 to 18. Literally each other’s best friends, the kids congregate at their clubhouse after school three days a week, as well as Sunday mornings, and sometime Saturday. Ignacio, along with six other coaches, teach team members how to build a bike, change a tire, maneuver traffic, bump into each other without falling, take care of their bike – and most important, how “to encourage and be super-supportive of each other.”

“Everyone sticks together,” Franklin said. And Ignacio concurred. It’s a “tight group,” he added, “with everyone caring for each other.”

“I make sure they have both a mountain bike and a road bike that fits them,” Ignacio said. “The bikes are like a library, when one kid grows out of one, they get another one, and a smaller kid uses the old bike.”

The kids learn how to take care of the bike and maintain it.

“Once the kid earns a spot on the team, the bike is theirs to take home, ride to school, and compete on,” Ignacio said. “Because of his growing so much, Logan has gone through nine to 10 bikes in the 2½ years he’s been with El Grupo,” Dreier said. “As a single parent, there is no way I could have given that to him.”

The team competes in many area cycling events, in both road and mountain bike races. They also support bike commuting and self-contained touring. “We do everything but BMX,” Ignacio said. Only five years old, the team has ridden Tour of the Gila, Mt. Graham Hill Climb, and El Tour de Tucson, among other cycling events.

“Everyone rides El Tour,” Ignacio said. “It’s a team event. Some of the kids use El Tour as a testing ground for self and others as a social event.” This year, five rode the 109-miler, eight cycled the 67-mile segment, and the rest pedaled the 40-mile distance. “We stick together in El Tour,” Nathan said, about riding their chosen segment as a group.

But regardless of how enthusiastic members are about cycling, their school work comes first. “Ignacio pays attention to grades,” Dreier, self-proclaimed El Grupo Den Mother, said. “He reviews Logan’s grade reports and talks to the kids about school. He wants them to be successful at everything they do.” All but one team member who “graduated” from El Grupo have gone on to college, Ignacio reported.

Ignacio and Daniela have created winners on and off the bike. On race day, El Grupo has placed first in their age division at the Arizona Champ Races, 24-hours of the Old Pueblo Mountain Bike Race, and El Tour de Tucson.

El Grupo also has broadened team members’ horizons, according to Dreier. “The kids have spent at week at Ft. Lewis

College in Durango, training with mountain bikes, and have gone to Mexico.”

“We spent a week training at the velodrome in Hermosillo (Sonora),” Ignacio, said. The kids raced on the outdoor track and “were exposed to a different culture,” said Dreier.

Every spring break, the teens take a self-contained bike tour. “They’ve cycled between Flagstaff and the Grand Canyon, ridden between Bisbee and Tucson, traveled to Madera Canyon and Colossal Cave,” Ignacio said. With Ignacio’s help, they plan routes, supplies, and food menus.

A few of El Grupo’s graduates have undertaken longer self-contained bike tours. “Last year, two of our girls spent two months cycling from Seattle to San Francisco,” Ignacio said. This year a team member is planning to ride from Portland, Oregon to Tucson. These trips build strength and courage, Ignacio said.

Team members develop leadership and mentoring skills, noted Dreier. Her son has learned a lot about discipline. “He’s up at 5 or 6 o’clock in the morning on the weekends to ride, getting ready for the Saturday morning shoot-out.”

There is no formal recruitment, and most new members learn about El Grupo by way of other kids. Some found Ignacio through BICAS, where he teaches the Build a Bike program. Some have needed to perform mandatory community service projects, and after completing their programs have joined El Grupo. “I look for kids that wouldn’t have a chance of racing bikes without this team,” Ignacio said.

A non-profit organization, El Grupo operates on a shoe-string budget.

“We’re all volunteers,” noted Ignacio. “Nobody pulls a salary.” Team members and their families pay no fees.

“The Tucson biking community has been very generous to us,” Ignacio said. “Bike shops and GABA have given us a lot of things.”

In exchange, the kids give back to the community. They have volunteered for Pima County Department of Transportation helping at bike rodeos, health fairs, and block parties by setting up bike obstacle courses and leading neighborhood kids through them. In addition, they regularly fix bikes for The Giving Tree and volunteer with Perimeter Bicycling, stuffing goodie bags for El Tour de Tucson’s kid ride in exchange for their entry fees.

El Grupo is “so much more than a riding group,” Dreier said. “It’s a self-esteem builder.” With their enthusiasm, dedication, and hard work, El Grupo is well on its way to achieving Ignacio’s goal of making the world a more open place, and consequently a better one. For more information about El Grupo go online to [elgrupo.org](http://elgrupo.org).



El Grupo’s newest members with Assistant Coach Hunter King (far left) after their 40 mile El Tour Finish. Photo by Kathleen Dreier.