

Community on wheels

By Helen Cronin

He's a familiar sight in Bendigo. Any weekday morning you'll see Eddie Barkla on his way to work with two bulging panniers strapped to his bike. Often he sits comfortably at the back of a bunch of elite cyclists. If they happened to break down, Eddie could pull out a first aid kit, spare clothes, spare tubes and tools and get them going again. Most of what he carries is to help anyone he find in trouble on the side of the road. It's a mission that's earned him the nickname the cycling chaplain.

Cycling is one of the two passions in Eddie's life. His first bike was a hand-me-down single speed Malvern Star that his father bought from selling rabbit skins. Now the six members of his family own 16 bikes between them. That doesn't include two tandems and other bikes that he lends to people to encourage them to start cycling. "We're hoarders by nature," he laughs.

They are also very good cyclists by nature. His son, Simon, races on the track and road. It was his influence that got Eddie racing on the track. But long before that Eddie was chasing down elite cyclists to ride with them. "It used to really frustrate them," he says, "because in those days I had a baby seat on, with a bag in it. And I used to be dressed with a tie over the shoulder, and I'd be going for it."

He brings the same energy to everything he does. Start with a full-time job at Powercor. Add the Powercor Bicycle Users Group, organising fund raising cycling teams, newsletters for a workplace faith network and the Bendigo cycling network, and a range of other community activities. He crosses

all boundaries, the same way he says cycling does. "It really encourages me the number of people across all walks of life - CEOs, doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, builders, plumbers, electricians."

For nearly nine years he has published a weekly email newsletter that now goes to over 300 cyclists. Most live in Bendigo, a few in the surrounding district and some in Melbourne. But he's really not sure how far it goes. "The newsletter was about creating a community that had cyclists in it, for your good health, wellbeing, creating links, where we could network with each other and had a strong component of fund raising."

A strong sense of community has a long tradition in Eddie's family. It is also integral to the other passion in his life, his faith. There is no conflict between the two he says. "The more I came to understand cycling, the more I understood how it linked with my love for God." Understanding between cyclists and motorists is something he's always worked to improve through education and example. "As cyclists we need to think as motorists, they need to think as cyclists." Sharing the road harmoniously is his vision.

As he signs his weekly newsletter: "Look forward to seeing you on the road soon, God willing."

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