



Bulletin photo by Tanishka Poal

Participants bike Clear Creek Trail near the Turkey Lane trail head on June 15. One of the bikers suggested the trail should be renamed Rocky Lane as they navigated the path.

PEDAL POWER

Mountain biking program helps kids build confidence, connect with nature

By ALEX MARGRAVE
alex@buffalobulletin.com

Monday night is mountain bike night this summer thanks to a local couple with a passion for getting kids outdoors.

Nearly a dozen young riders joined Lauren and Zach Mills at the trailhead on Turkey Lane the evening of June 15. Kids traversed the trail on two wheels, navigating rocks, uphill and downhill sections and even a small jump on the roughly 3-mile ride.

Mountain biking is a family activity for Lauren and Zach and their kids Rhett, 9, and Dax, 8. For Lauren, an educator at Meadowlark Elementary School, it is also an activity that is unique in teaching resilience and problem solving while also connecting kids with each other and the outdoors. Zach helped Lauren get into mountain biking 15 years ago.

"You're working on a lot of skills that I feel don't always come out in other sports," she said. "It's hard sometimes, it takes a lot of resilience to fall off your bike and get back up

and want to continue to do it. That has really built a lot of character, watching my own kids eat it over and over and over and they're, like, 'OK, let's keep going.' Obviously that took some working through, coaching them through the failure part of it, because that comes with the territory."

I, too, expected to fall off my bike while trailing this bike gang my first time mountain biking. I was surprised not only to not fall off - don't be fooled, I very nearly tipped as my feet flew off the pedals a couple of times flying through particularly rocky, technical sections - but I also really enjoyed the challenge and quickly felt comfortable picking up speed and navigating tough parts of the trail.

Though 20 years older than many of the riders, I benefited from some of the lessons imparted by the Millses throughout the trek. Before leaving the parking lot, riders were instructed to turn their bikes upside down to check



Bulletin photos by Tanishka Poal

Carter Fagerland practices jumps as participants learn to mountain bike.

MOUNTAIN BIKING
continued on page B3



Bulletin photo by Tanishka Poal

Zach Mills talks about biking etiquette as participants learn to mountain bike. Mills instructed participants that bikers share the trail with walkers and that walkers have the right of way.

Mountain biking:

Love of the outdoors

Continued from B1

the ABCs: air in the tires, brakes in working order and chain attached and functional.

Young riders were reminded to not switch gears unless they're moving, otherwise it can mess up the bike's mechanics.

Throughout my ride, I was thinking of flamingo feet, Lauren's way of reminding riders to keep pedals parallel to one another. Having a pedal close to the ground increases the likelihood of it hitting a rock and putting the bike off balance.

Mountain bike night, hosted at the trailhead starting at 5:30 p.m. each Monday this summer, is open to kids in kindergarten and older. The program is open to novice and experienced riders alike. On a recent Monday, kids were encouraged to challenge themselves but know their limits. Hopping off the bike and walking if it feels right is encouraged, as is hitting a sick jump if they are up for an obstacle.

I watched kids who at first said they were fearful of a jump opportunity but then decided to try it, having seen their friends try it out first. (Lauren recently earned her outdoor emergency care technician certification, and both Lauren and Zach are CPR certified).

"I hope that they become interested in a new skill," Lauren said. "I want them to have a positive experience of biking, so I want to make it as fun as possible, and I hope that it just becomes another tool in their toolbox, like,

'Guess what I can do? I feel confident doing this.' But basically the foundation is, I just want them to have fun, I want them to feel joy out of being outside with their friends, and, hopefully, they'll discover something that they're good at or that they want to get better at."

Mountain biking on difficult trails requires problem solving – knowing how to get over and through obstacles – and learning how to position your body. Lauren said that mountain biking has improved her balance, coordination and athleticism.

"It takes practice figuring out how I can be connected to my bike," she said. "It's almost an extension of yourself once you've been doing it enough. My husband is an amazing biker, and watching him move over stuff, I'm like, how do you do that?"

More than anything, Lauren said, she and Zach hope that their mountain biking program cultivates a love of the outdoors in young riders.

"Being a teacher, you see kids who are becoming disconnected from the outdoors and becoming more connected to technology or screens or less authentic experiences," she said. "I just feel like they learn so much more about themselves and what they're capable of when they do have to problem solve or just spend time alone sometimes. I think no matter what the activity is, they should all be outside."