

# TOPANGA LIFE

## THE VIEW FROM CHRIS KELLY'S BIKE *By Diana Mathur*

For Chris Kelly, owner of Topanga Creek Outpost, the antidote to the frustration and sorrow of current events was Do Something. The Something was to take another batch of disadvantaged youth mountain biking in the Santa Monica Mountain wilderness.

Outfitting all with deluxe bike rentals from his fleet, Kelly recently spearheaded a group ride for a couple dozen adolescents over the forested and rolling terrain of Cheseboro Canyon Trail. The cross-country style trail offers a steady uphill, a few steep rocky inclines, flowing single track, the power and the balm of nature, a streambed cruise through oak trees, thrilling descents, working the body, refreshing quietude, and the camaraderie of fellow adventurers.

It is Kelly's custom to stop in the middle of the ride (all group rides) to read good literature or poetry. Sometimes everybody writes and reads a haiku. The pause bonds the whole group together for a moment. The effect is knowing that All are part of the group.

The kids are coming from strictly monitored settings, group homes and foster homes, and into wide open freedom, but Kelly has had no disciplinary issues. He credits the beginning of the ride, when he goes through the rules of mountain biking with the whole group. "When you come across a mountain lion, here's what to do. Raise your bike over your head and band together. Look big!" Nobody has been inclined to ride off on his own.

"In life we all have a memory from childhood or high school where we went camping. I want to have a memory for these kids," Kelly says. "Some have never been on a mountain bike before. Some have never been on a trail. It's a new experience, being in the forest—powerful!"

To see what this memory might look like, and for a stunning reminder of the grandeur of our regional trail system, visit TopangaCreekOutpost.com and watch The Full Story of Topanga Creek Outpost + Rogue Journeymen (the furry rogue with the tail is Rover the Shop Dog, a rescue, galloping in pace with his adopted pack. Rogue Journeymen is the house brand for artisanal leather and canvas goods.)

Besides a two-wheeled memory to look back on, Kelly is showing each youth (there are fewer group homes for girls. The present need is for outings for boys) an alternative path he could ride into looming adulthood, a future to embrace with a sense of adventure.

When Kelly began this philanthropy, 15 years ago, he was taking out groups of juvenile delinquents who did well in school/jail, rewarding them with a trip away from the detention facility, to go mountain biking.

Having earned an undergraduate degree in psychology from Boston University, Kelly became aware that positive reinforcement is the tool that encourages desired behavior. "What those kids are getting

all the time is punishment," he explained. "So, if I can, I want to be a part of rewarding them for work well done."

Picture kids out of the heart of East L.A., wearing institutional orange shorts, street smart beyond their years, coming out of rough situations. Kelly wanted them to be little kids on bikes for a moment, to play, to enjoy the scavenger hunts he would prepare for them. On one scavenger hunt they had to find a purple flower, and photograph it with a Polaroid camera—with at least ten kids in the frame. Kelly still has the picture on the bike shop bulletin board.

In recent years, Kelly has not been permitted to host incarcerated youth. But thanks to coordination with the non-profit organization It's Time for Kids, he makes mountain bike memories for adolescents from group homes and foster homes. These kids, who may have been removed from dangerous environments, on probation, or in trouble at school, range in age from 14 - 17.

This demographic is often overlooked, compared to younger wards, but the older teens are at a critical juncture, coming of age, bearing the stress of global pandemic quarantine on top of their usual institutional restriction. Typical kids, they want to go out with friends, go to events, and look rad. That's why Topanga Creek Outpost gave them custom-made, Rogue Journeymen leather belts last Christmas.

With the need for social distancing, there are not many options for recreation or fun. You can, however, ride a bike, and while you're at it, be with family and friends, and improve your health. You can pedal around the neighborhood, or burn off 100 miles of pandemic craziness to fully reboot. You can, with care, be part of the biking community.

When Kelly wanted to get the foster kids on the trail, the community stepped up, volunteering to transport the bikes, and a couple of folks (including a frontline Covid nurse) kicked in for snacks and water bottles.

Community is what makes Topanga Creek Outpost more than a retail shop. The wooden cabin perched between Topanga Canyon Boulevard and the creek that carved the canyon, is a hub of adventure and possibility run under the mantra UnPredict Your Journey.

The Outpost community is eclectic and inclusive. Kelly's partner, Eric Wu, is a pillar. Seasoned bike mechanics reach celebrity status there. On Saturday mornings, a cross section of Southern California gears up for the group ride, ranging from PhD chemists to chefs, surfers to web designers, movie stars to high schoolers.

Chris Kelly's shop is home to this community and he nurtures its growth, whether by leading the hotshots in a 24-hour endurance race, or by riding at the back of the group with a newcomer, never letting her



Chris Kelly and his crew of mountain bikers take a break in the shade of an oak grove in the Santa Monica Mountains. Photos courtesy of Topanga Creek Outpost



Kelly's customers include people from all over Los Angeles and all levels of experience but he especially loved introducing at-risk youth to mountain biking and the joy of exploring the local mountains.



Rides range from beginner to endurance experiences, but always include a break for reflection and often poetry. The four-footed member of the crew is Rover, the Topanga Creek outpost shop dog.



Topanga Creek Outpost Riders at Eagle Rock.

feel weak or slow.

The pandemic has preceded a sharp uptick in bicycle sales. Topanga Creek Outpost is experiencing a nonstop flood of 1) folks who want to buy a new bike, who perhaps until now had been putting off the purchase, and 2) folks pulling their old bike out of the garage to get it fixed up for riding.

Since the bike shop is doing okay, Chris Kelly figured some artists could also benefit from the boom. @thedirtyboy and @rad\_rio were recently commissioned to paint the fence. The resulting portraits represent the Everybody in the Outpost community.

The next trail ride for kids from group or foster homes will be July 17. Volunteers are always needed. Contact Chris Kelly at topangacreek@me.com.

Anybody who can throw down for snacks and water bottles should donate through: It's Time for Kids, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Encino. Please contact Kendall at 4KendallWolf@gmail.com, (818) 648-8794.

To ride: you can rent a high quality mountain bike for an afternoon for about \$50 - \$125. Call ahead for an appointment, as the Outpost observes social distancing safety measures.

Come by the shop to get suggestions about trails and hills, and to gauge ability for the group rides. In general, on the first Saturday of the month, the group ride is a little more nurturing and relaxed (though still dealing with Topanga's hills!) Rides on the last Saturday of the month are more intense. Follow Topanga Creek Outpost on Instagram and Facebook for details about bikepacking adventures.

Some people have been arguing about the best way forward from our problems. Chris Kelly reminds us, "We all need to Do Something." Imagine if everybody Did. ■

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