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OPINION

The Newport Daily News

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GUEST VIEW

'Lady Who Planted Bikes' is steering us down right path

By Tim McMahon

In Jean Giono's magical 1953 tale, "The Man Who Planted Trees," one man, Elzéard Bouffier, plants tens of thousands of oak trees, singlehandedly restoring the beauty of nature where it had long been neglected. As the landscape is transformed in ways unimaginable, young families arrive, bringing hope and joy to the surrounding villages. "Walking along the roads, remarks Giono, "you will meet men and women in full health, and boys and girls who know how to laugh."

Here in Newport, we too are onto something magical — a culture of bicycling.

Last year, I joined Bike Newport, a new organization founded by "The Lady Who Planted Bikes," Bari George. For the past two years, Bari has collaborated with almost every organization in the city and state to move mountains. Already we find that Newport has its first bike lane, new places to park bikes, signed roads, maps, bike skills classes, weekend fun rides, a shop for restoring bikes and



Daily News file photo

Bike Newport volunteers help park bikes during the Newport Folk Festival at Fort Adams State Park. The racks collected more than 800 bikes each day of the concerts at the fort.

more cyclists at this year's Newport Folk Festival than I could count.

The whole enchilada is detailed in a remarkable application to designate Newport a "Bicycle Friendly Community." Alongside Bari's efforts, Tina Dolen and the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission have moved forward

with a plan for a bayside bicycle path to share the existing rail line property running from Newport to Portsmouth. If you've ever been on the East Bay or Blackstone Valley bike trails, you'll know just what a terrific idea this is. On such trails, we might expect to see Jean Giono's happy, hopeful families

leaving their cars, computers and TVs while returning to the beauty of nature.

Through a culture of cycling we find people laughing, recreating, enjoying an ice cream cone together and breathing fresh air. These efforts combined will bring into view long stretches of verdant scenery and city superlatives, creating a transformative effect and bringing about a feeling of true freedom.

Jonah Lehrer writes in his May 25, 2012, Wall Street Journal article, "Mom was Right: Go Outside," that humans are quickly becoming an indoor species and losing contact with nature as American children between the ages of 8 and 18 currently spend more than four hours a day interacting with technology.

From 2006 to 2010, Lehrer explains, the percentage of young children regularly engaging in outdoor recreation fell by roughly 15 percentage points. Citing several surprising studies about the mental benefits of spending time in natural settings, he discusses "the natural world's restorative

effect on our minds, calming our frazzled nerves and refreshing the tired cortex. After a brief exposure to the outdoors," he continues, "people are more creative, happier and better able to focus." It is the contexts we create that frame our enjoyment of life.

Like Jean Giono, who inspires us with the magnificence that man and nature can accomplish together, we have our own heroes who are collaborating to harness nature's magic in Newport. From more bicycle-friendly city roads and Smart Cycling classes to a public bike tune-up shop and a grand plan for a seaside trail, we're suddenly onto something big. Echoing the efforts of Giono's Elzéard Bouffier, our city by the sea is increasingly becoming the place where "you will meet men and women in full health, and boys and girls who know how to laugh." Thanks to Bari George and her friends, we are planting bicycles!

Tim McMahon of Middletown is a member of Bike Newport and a history teacher at St. Michael's Country Day School.