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YOON S. BYUN/GLOBE STAFF

Wendy Woodfield (front), joined Michael Lamb (left), Pata Suyemoto, Maria Vasilakis, and Susan McLucas at a bicycle riding lesson in Somerville.

Start at any age

Demand rises for bike riding lessons for adults

By Emma Brown
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

SOMERVILLE — Michael Lamb is a 44-year-old history teacher with a quiet smile and unusual courage. He's learning, finally, how to ride a bicycle — despite being nearly four decades older than the usual beginner. His goal is modest: ride well enough to accompany his two young children on local bike paths.

"The older you get," he says, "you feel a little strange asking for help."

But Lamb is hardly alone. Gas prices hovering above \$4 per gallon have led to the busiest season so far for the woman known as Boston's Bike Whisperer, Susan McLucas, a 59-year-old chronic smiler with a reputation for teaching even the most fearful and frustrated adults to balance on two wheels. En-

rollment in Bicycle Riding for Beginners, offered through the Cambridge Center for Adult Education, has nearly doubled since 2006. And demand for one-on-one lessons is on the rise as well.

"I used to consider it kind of a sideline, but it's almost a full-time job now," said McLucas, who has operated the Bicycle Riding School since 1985 out of a tire- and wrench-filled barn behind her Somerville home.

There, on a recent blue-skied Saturday, Lamb and three other grinning, nervous grown-ups gathered for their first of four lessons. Helmeted, and moving a little stiffly in knee and elbow pads, each picked out one of McLucas's 20-odd bikes, lined up smallest to largest in her driveway's dappled light.

"You want to be able to sit on the seat with

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Bicycle riding lessons on rise

► BICYCLES

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your feet flat on the ground,” said McLucas, her brown hair shot through with gray. Many of her students are shorter than average, she said, and have had scary experiences teetering on too-tall bikes. Others grew up in cities or abroad and never learned. The majority are women.

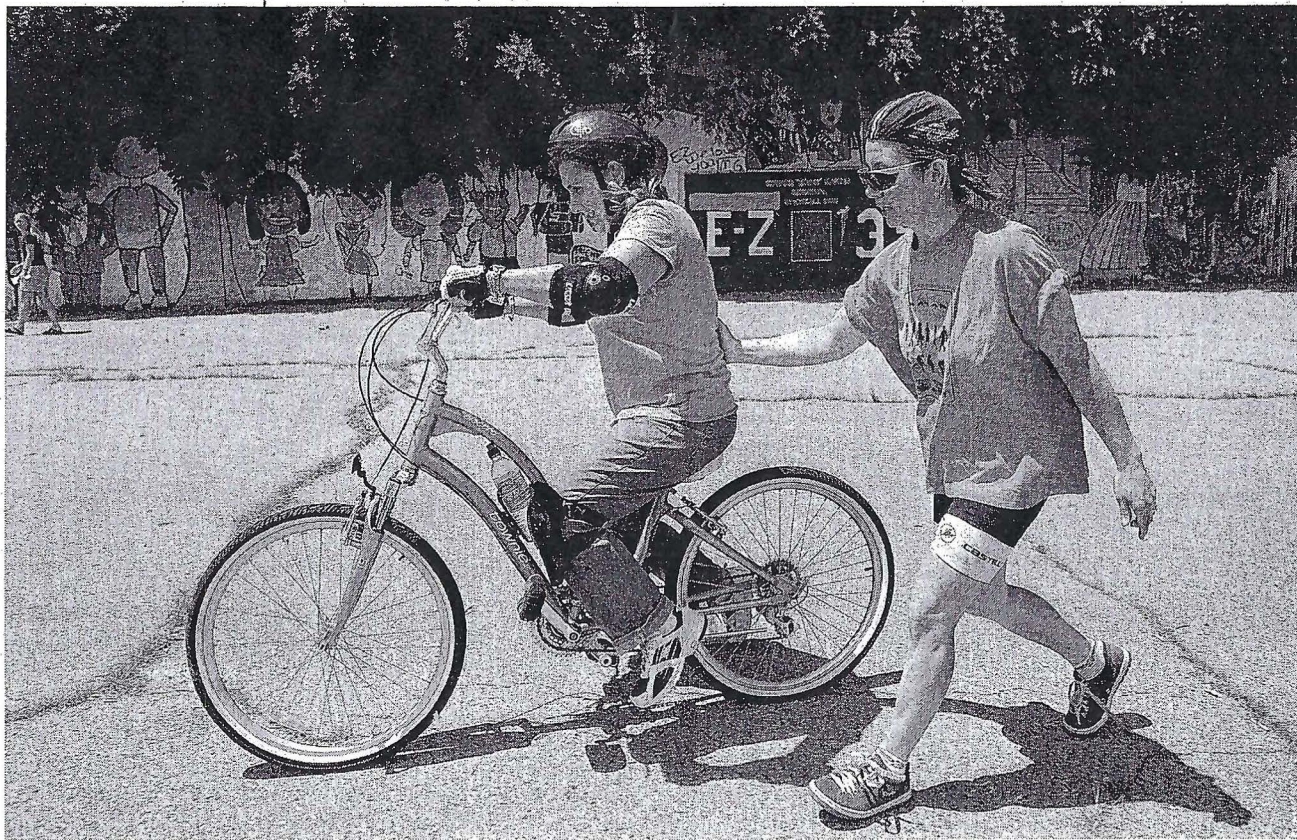
▶ TRAINING WHEELS

To watch a video on adults learning and re-learning how to ride, go to boston.com/globe.

“I must say, this morning I had second thoughts about coming,” admitted Wendy Woodfield, wearing a T-shirt adorned with three bicycles arranged in a circle, and inspecting the fleet. “But then I said, ‘No, you signed up, you paid money’ — and I really want to learn to bike.”

The 64-year-old English as a Second Language teacher last climbed into the saddle in 1961, when John F. Kennedy was president and the Beatles had yet to release their first single. Just over a year ago, she suffered a thyroid condition that left her temporarily unable to walk, talk, or balance.

McLucas is an activist who has protested more than one war and who 11 years ago started the non-profit Healthy Tomorrow to end the mutilation of women's genitals in Mali. Teaching people to cycle is a sort of activism, too: “It’s part of getting rid of cars,” she said, “and making bikes rule the world.”



YOON S. BYUN/GLOBE STAFF

Pata Suyemoto gave Maria Vasilakis a push as she learns to balance on a bicycle during a recent lesson in Somerville.

This summer, she’s teaching about 20 students a week. They pay \$25 per 90-minute lesson, or \$92 for the four group lessons through the Cambridge Center, plus \$5 for bike rental. McLucas figures she has taught nearly 2,000 people ages 5 to 82, including a woman with one leg and a handful of desperate out-of-towners from as far away as Missouri and Texas who could not find any place closer to home to learn. Only five students have failed to learn.

The key, McLucas says, is to ignore the pedals and give up any hope of going straight at first. “You are at the mercy of the bike,” she tells her charges, straddling their bicycles at one end of a gently sloping empty lot behind Powder

House Community Elementary School, a short walk from her house. “Give a little push off, and then whichever way you start to lean, go that way. Even if it means going in a circle — just follow the bike.”

One by one, giving one another room to bob and weave, the students shoved off, dragging the soles of their shoes on the pavement. They looped along a little to the bottom of the slope, then dismounted to walk their bicycles back to the top for another go.

“I’m nervous,” said Maria Vasilakis, 41, who has not ridden since she was 8 years old. And she looks it, her shoulders drawn up around her ears and her eyes locked on

the ground in fierce determination not to fall.

“A little more speed! Wobble, wobble, Maria!” McLucas called out. “You rock! You rule! Don’t look down!” She is not at all unnerved by her students’ harrowing wiggles and wavers. Her enthusiasm, unembarrassed and sincere, transforms this unremarkable asphalt lot into a place where students — some having spent years lying and dodging to keep their inability a secret — feel normal.

As the group’s confidence grew, they lifted their feet off the ground and coasted, leaning this way and that, eventually tracing long, slow circles.

Three riders graduated from coasting with outstretched legs to

coasting with one foot up on a pedal. Then, suddenly, a 40-year-old woman was no longer coasting. She started pumping both pedals.

“Holy moly!” she yelled. “I can go home and have a drink and celebrate!”

Woodfield seemed to have regained her balance just fine. Turning, however, is still a challenge. “I can’t steer! I can’t steer!” she cried, pedaling within feet of a group of bystanders, her back straight and eyes straight ahead, focused on some far-off horizon.

Meanwhile, Lamb was still at stage one: leaning with the bike, dragging his feet. “I thought I’d have gotten it by now,” he said, shrugging off his frustration as the

‘Whichever way you start to lean, go that way . . . just follow the bike.’

SUSAN MCLUCAS
During a recent lesson

sun beat down on the asphalt lot and the lesson drew to a close. Ten years ago a friend tried to help the Jersey City native but lacked the patience to see him through the wobbly stages. “But there’s progress, and there’s three more sessions. Who cares if I look silly, you know?”

Each student progresses at his or her own speed, said Pata Suyemoto, McLucas’s co-teacher. But by the fourth lesson, they will all be ready for a 2-mile ride along the Minuteman bike path to a celebratory picnic at Spy Pond. Then they will need further practice before taking on Boston’s potholes and harried drivers.

Most of McLucas’s students are simply grateful for the balance they have learned, however shaky it might be at first.

“I can use a hammer, and I can sew a dress,” said Maud Bleus, who grew up in Haiti, where it was not proper for girls to cycle. “I’m a grandmother, a mother, and a professional. And I can’t ride a bike and I’m like no, no, no, that’s not right.”

The 60-year-old financial officer, who now lives in Florida, could not make it to Massachusetts for a lesson — so she taught herself to ride at home last Easter using a set of instructions authored by McLucas. “Within an hour, I wasn’t a pro, but I was riding,” Bleus said. “And my God, it’s like somebody gave me millions of dollars.”

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