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Give and take

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The theft of bikes for poor children hasn't fazed volunteers who
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repair them

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ARLINGTON--Someone smashed a window at an east Arlington storefront a week ago and made off with a bike or two intended for Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex children.

How many bikes were taken isn't known, but volunteer Ron Helmintaler said he doesn't believe it was many, because mission workers had picked up a load of about 50 before the break-in.

"The funny thing is that they could have went down to the Mission and got that bicycle for free," Helmintaler said. "If they would have asked us, we would have given it to them."

Giving has been their goal from the beginning.

Since August, Helmintaler and other volunteers from First Baptist Church have been volunteering their time and mechanical skills to fix hundreds of second-hand bikes as Christmas presents for children served by Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex, a nonprofit organization.

The church group's volunteers have grown from three to 10 men. And their project to repair the hundreds of bicycles that people and businesses donate to Mission Arlington outgrew the carport they were working under and was moved to a donated storefront on Division Street.

The group has finished about 200 bicycles with hundreds more stacked in a back room awaiting the volunteers' handiwork, Helmintaler said. They haven't set a goal but will do as many as possible, he said.

"We have a lot of bikes, but we don't have near enough," Helmintaler said. "The need is far greater than the supply."

Tillie Burgin, director of Mission Arlington, said some of the bicycles have been awaiting repairs for years because the organization did not have enough volunteers to fix them.

"These guys from First Baptist took it on as a project, and it's helped us a great deal," she said.

Last year, more than 21,000 people came through Mission Arlington's Christmas Store and the nonprofit organization gave out about 2,000 bikes, Burgin said. This year, the organization is expecting to serve from 24,000 to 25,000 low-income people.

"People panic and they want toys for their kids," Burgin said. "We tell people to hold on to their rent and utility money and let us take care of the extras."

A few new bikes merely need assembly. Some of the old bikes they use for spare parts, and others they can fix with a box of tools, some mild mechanical knowledge and a can of WD-40.

"The kids don't care how new it is -- they've got wheels," Jim Smith said.

Although the break-in was disheartening, it was only a slight setback, Helmintaler said. He said they'll keep working because they have an order to fill.

"I'm part of making a child happy at Christmas time," he said.

21,000 people came through Mission Arlington's Christmas Store last year

2,000 bikes were given away last year

10 volunteers available to repair hundreds of bicycles -- seven more than last year

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