

BUSINESS

Local wheel builder, race mechanic loves his work, Chattanooga

By Chloé Morrison • Published Saturday, July 30th 2011 at 6:47am



Local wheel builder and race mechanic Merlyn Townley has been in the business for nearly 30 years. Staff photo.

Former professional bicyclist and Pennsylvania resident Jim Swasey loves wheels that local race mechanic Merlyn Townley makes for several reasons.

“Not only are they zippy and fast and beautifully built,” Swasey said, before pausing to preface his statement with the fact that it might not be politically correct. “They are a chick-magnet. I’m serious. I go on these rides. In Philly, I did 72 miles and more young ladies would cruise up and say, ‘Wow! Nice set of wheels.’”

Townley has traveled the world — 60 countries and six continents — as a race mechanic and that’s how he met Swasey.

Now — after “a girl,” who is now his wife — drew him to the area, Townley has settled here and runs [Merlyn Mechanics](#), a wheel building business in North Chattanooga.

“I initially thought it was a dead-end job,” he said. “I thought I’d do it through high school and through college.”

But after getting degrees from the Rhode Island School of Design in industrial design and landscape architecture and not finding a job in the field, he decided to “do the bicycle thing for a bit longer.”

So, for eight years he worked in a bicycle shop doing the kind of work that few people do nowadays.

“In those days, a really good mechanic could do everything,” he said. “The way the industry goes these days, it’s been evolving to the point where people in shops no longer know how to build wheels. After a while, they forget. But I didn’t forget.”

On Thursday morning, his small, 60-square-foot shop inside his home was filled with sunlight, tools and bicycle wheels.



Townley's home-shop is about 60-square feet, he said.

In the corner there was photography equipment, because he is also an artist.

He sat on a mustard-yellow couch, surrounded by vintage-style furniture and decor — which he said is his wife's doing — and shared his passions, which range from traveling to bicycling and art to math.

Math and wheel building go hand-and-hand and the math is part of what he likes about the bicycle work, he said.

There are measurements and calculations and weights to take into account when creating a wheel.

He has done math problems — such as figuring out how many beer bottles or cans could fit on an acre of land — in his head to kill time as he drove through the middle-of-nowhere while traveling with bicycle races, he said.

The answer to his question, assuming that 12 bottles fit on one square foot, is 522,720.

He also calculated how long it would take to drink all those beers — assuming it didn't kill you — if a person drank one every 10 minutes. The answer to that question, according to Townley, is that it would take 9.555 years.

Townley also spoke about the importance of color in bicycles and wheels.

“Color has become less and less of a factor,” he said. “Nowadays, it's all about mass production and big numbers within the cycling community.”

Townley recently worked with local students in [art bike workshops](#) and Create Here also awarded him a [MakeWork grant](#).

Since he hates to waste materials, Townley's wheel building also spawned a smaller project that developed out of necessity.

One day he needed a bottle opener, but only had bicycle scraps. He cut the rim and found it works well as a bottle opener. He also creates bracelets out of spokes and sells both items to help support his business.



Townley created a bottle opener out of a bicycle rim. He sells them around town for \$10.

Even though he loves traveling and did it every year for 25 years, he said he can't image a better place to be now than Chattanooga.

"Having been to almost every major city in the United States, I can honestly say there is no place I'd rather live than Chattanooga," he said. "It's a rare thing. I don't think people around the country know about it here. And that's kind of awesome."

Swasey thinks that it is kind of awesome that Townley devotes his talents to the bicycling community.

"He is a really intelligent artist," Swasey said. "It's just lucky for us that he loves to work on bikes. The cycling community is really thankful to have him. He could be at NASA or the CIA. He could be anywhere, but the fact that he thinks cycling is the grooviest thing on the planet is awesome."