

Step on the Pedal and Go: Coming of Age in Bermuda

by Lisa Falk

Have you ever seen parents clapping and yelling in excitement when their child first walks? Do you remember losing your first tooth and being rewarded by the tooth fairy? Why do we celebrate when a child starts school or graduates? These personal milestones signify a change in status. How we observe the change serves to mark the transition between one time and another. All over the world, people have special ways of acknowledging these milestones.

In Bermuda, getting a motorized bike at age 16 signals the beginning of adulthood and independence. It is an important milestone for teenagers. The process begins with dreaming, scheming, and coming up with the money, then progresses to picking out the bike, learning how it works, fiddling with it, and using it for social advantage and for gaining adult freedoms. Finally comes the time when teens can move on. At 18 they are able to drive a car, and, soon after, many leave the island to go away to school.

Heather Whalen describes how it was with her son, Paul:

From the time they are 14 and a half to 15, that's all they focus on. Work is secondary; homework is secondary. It's the bike and what they'll do *with* the bike and *to* the bike and the color of the bike and all that.... They worship the bike and the helmet and all the paraphernalia that goes with it.... At one point, I think, the bike was more important than basketball!... He actually admitted to me toward the end of the summer, "This bike is getting boring now, you know." That bike is like a rite of passage.

Paul remembers,

When I was 12 or 13 I started planning [how] to convince my mom to give me a bike when I reached 16. I knew she wouldn't take kindly to her son being on the road because there are so many accidents; so I had to start years

in advance persuading her to let me have a bike.... I spent two summers working for my bike and I saved up every cent.

Ms. Whalen said he could get a motorized bike at 16 but he would have to pay for a third of it. To do so, Paul got a restaurant job and saved his earnings, enough to pay for nearly the entire \$3,000 himself.

Signal of Independence

To a teenager in Bermuda, having a bike means you've grown up. It means freedom and independence. It means being accepted by the crowd. To a parent, it is the beginning of the pulling away from childhood dependence to adult independence. So having a bike actually represents a tough social time within a family, and not having a bike might mean the teen would have a tough social time with his peers. Ms. Whalen explained the new struggle the bike created:

With the bike came this new-found freedom and almost immediately this



*Heather Whalen and her son Paul
with his prized motorbike*

Lesson Ideas

Ask your students to think about transitions they have experienced and others they will go through that are important in creating their identity. Have each make a list, starting with physical achievements and moving on to the social aspects of growing up. Ask students to compare their lists with one other, and also to compare them with their parents' experiences. Do students of different cultural backgrounds have different milestones or ways of marking transitions? Are milestones different today than in their parents' time? What differences do they see between formal rites of passage, such as marriage, and life milestones, such as getting a license?

change of attitude. [He'd say] "I have to explain where I am going now?" Even before the bike, came the rules. ... I was told in no uncertain terms that I was the most old-fashioned mom [because of the curfew rules] ... But I had to stick with it for my sanity's sake and for his safety.

Paul saw all the rules as a part of the ritual associated with the bike and growing up. He said,

I didn't want a [birthday] party. I just wanted the bike. I picked it up after school and my mom took a couple of pictures. She gave one final lecture, you know. It's like you just have to sit through it or she'd say [if] you don't want to listen then you can't have the bike. You have to endure all the lectures. Then you have your freedom. Yes, there is a ritual—all the lecturing, the constant badgering about speeding and curfews. If you can go through that then you're okay. You are responsible.

Responsible—remember that word from the time you got your driver's license at age 16? But that probably wasn't the last time you felt grown up and responsible. How about when you graduated from high school or college, married, or had a child? Each of these are personal milestones. And with each is an associated custom: being given your parents' car keys or getting your own car, a graduation party, celebrating your first anniversary with a special gift.

Within national and regional cultures, ethnic groups, *Please turn to page 19*

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communities, and families, there are unique traditions that are practiced and passed on from one generation to the next to acknowledge milestones, sometimes in festive celebration, sometimes solemnly. These traditions help to reinforce our membership in a specific group.

Lisa Falk is director of education at the Arizona State Museum in Tucson. She recently wrote a handbook for Bermuda Connections: A Cultural Resource Guide for Classrooms, a kit produced by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage to place in every classroom in Bermuda. This article is based on material