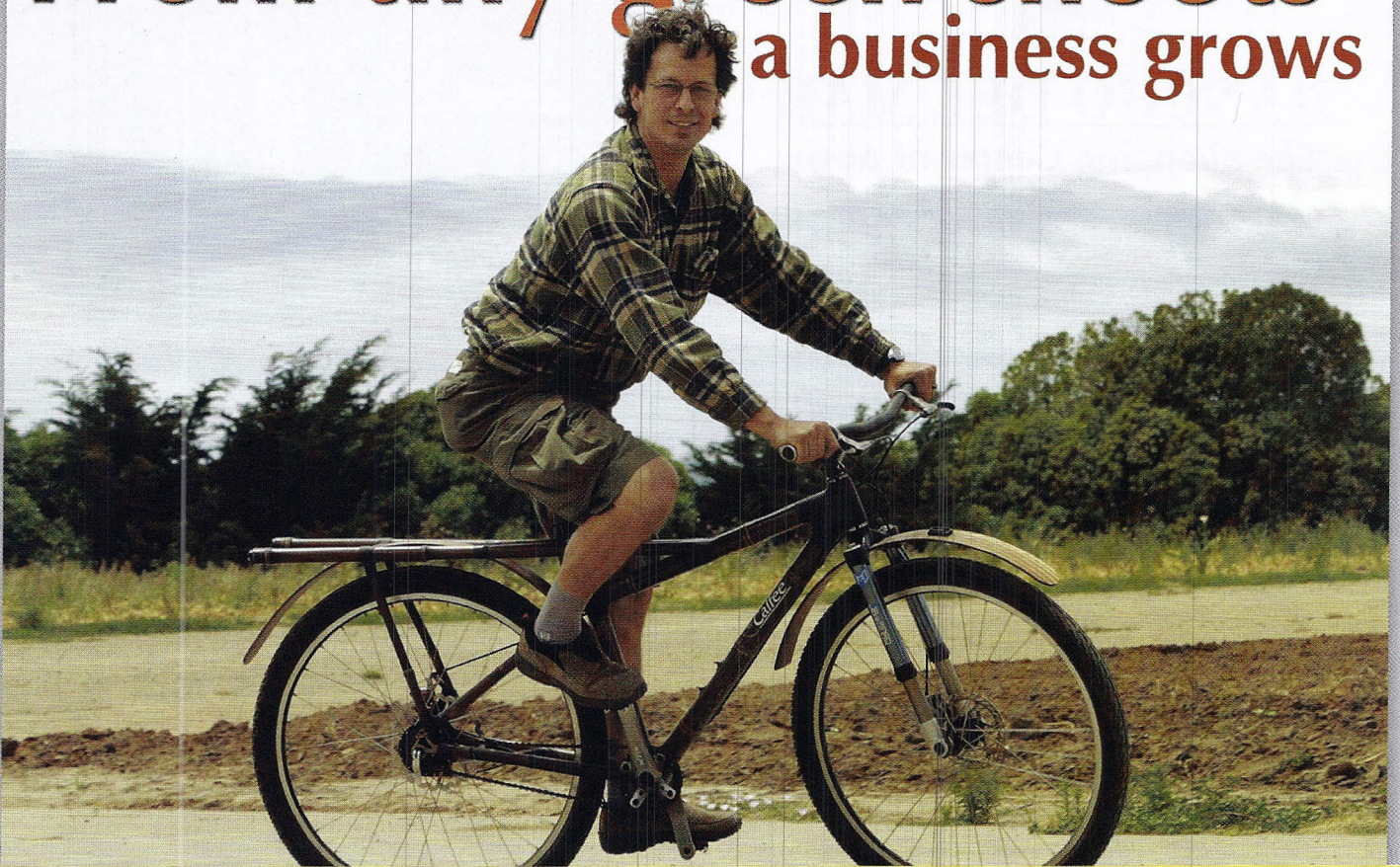


From tiny green shoots a business grows



Going round and round (the globe) on a bamboo bicycle

By Claudia Sternbach

It is a long way from the canyons of Manhattan to the villages of Ghana, but Craig Calfee made the journey. While studying sculpture at New York City's Pratt Institute, he supported himself as a bike messenger, navigating the wild streets of the urban jungle. Lately, however, the 47-year-old master craftsman has been spending time on the African continent, bringing two-wheeled transportation to folks who would otherwise have to hoof it. He leaves his home in Santa Cruz County, where Calfee Designs has been located since 1993, and makes the long trip with one goal in mind: to teach others how to build bikes. Bikes made of bamboo.

Calfee is known for his carbon-fiber bikes. He has built them for racing and mountain biking for years. But carbon fiber isn't readily available in Ghana. Bamboo is.

"Bamboo is as strong as steel and never corrodes or fatigues," Calfee explains as he stands next to a beautiful bamboo bike that looks more like a piece of art than a mode

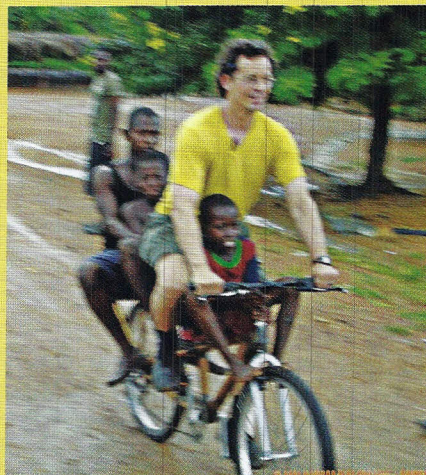


Photo: Calfee Design

Craig Calfee and friends take a spin on a "Bamboosero" bamboo bike in Ghana.

of transportation. It is midday and fog is billowing outside his Watsonville workshop. Just past the field and a narrow airstrip, the Pacific is a cold gray. But Calfee is dressed in shorts. His hair is curly and his enthusiasm is infectious.

(Above) This special model was designed for riding on the beach.

Calfee went to Africa for the first time in 1984 and was struck by the fact that so few people had access to something as simple as a bicycle. He saw that jobs were scarce in Ghana, but bamboo was plentiful. Eleven years later he built his first bamboo bike. Then he built a dozen more for friends and asked for feedback. It was good. But back then, in 1995, he was still building a business and raising a family, so Ghana would have to wait.

Yet the wheels of inspiration were spinning — and visions of Africa would not leave him alone. Finally, with his business humming along and his family settled, he decided to take the first step. What was to become the adventure of a lifetime began with a small posting on his company website: Did anyone have any interest in sponsoring an experiment in Ghana? In 2007, the Earth Institute at Columbia University offered to fund Calfee's first trip back to Africa. He was on his way.

Calfee has learned a lot in the past year and a half. He has come to realize that it isn't

PHOTOGRAPH DAN COYRO



Photo: Calfee Design

Craig Calfee taught these Africans to create bicycles from their native bamboo.

always financially possible for the residents of the two villages he visits to buy the bamboo bikes that are being built there. So while some of the bikes do stay in the community, many are brought back to the United States to be sold, with the proceeds going back to the Ghanaian villages.

"I'm taking things step by step," says Calfee. That goes for designing not just the bicycles but the business plan as well. No longer relying on funding from other sources, Calfee is the muscle and the money behind the enterprise.

"We have named it the "Bamboosero" project," he says, pointing over to another bamboo bike which is designed to haul cargo.

"We teach them to build the bicycles, and then they teach others," he explains. He hopes the business plan will take root and grow as prolifically as the plant it is named for. All indications are that it will. The people of the city of Accra and the two neighboring villages in Ghana seem to be captivated by the bikes.

"I was riding one of the bamboo bikes one afternoon and kids were chasing me," Calfee recalls with a grin. A young boy stopped him and told him about his uncle, who as a young man had wanted to go to school but needed transportation.

"His uncle had cobbled together a bike

and used it to get to school every day," Calfee says. He then entered his bike in a government sponsored competition which he won. The bike, the boy told Calfee that warm afternoon, is in a museum.

"I was a little skeptical," admits Calfee. "But it turned out to be true." The boy who wanted an education so fiercely he built a bike to go to school is now a grown man who, after learning the craft from Calfee, now teaches others to build bamboo bikes. His name is Wisdom.

The bikes are perfect in their simplicity. They are single-gear and made from natural materials. One look and their workings are easily understood.

"Even people who are not mechanically inclined get them," says Calfee. He has a growing list of customers who want to try them out here in the U.S. There is an allure to the green aspect of the bicycles.

In Calfee's coastal workshop, a craftsman puts the finishing touches on a frame. The wind is picking up outside and Craig Calfee is headed home for a late lunch. He'll begin packing soon for his third trip to Africa. He doesn't see an end to the project on the horizon. What he does envision is a 10-passenger bike built of bamboo. One that children could ride to school and back every day. One that could open up a whole new world for them. ■