



Sean Houghton, of Manlius, N.Y., brushes dirt and concrete off the top of a housing foundation in Lebanon yesterday. Houghton, who is pursuing a graduate degree in architecture from the University of Michigan, is a member of Bike and Build, a group that organizes cross country bicycle trips that benefit affordable housing.

(Valley News — Veronica Wilson)

## Hitting the Road for Housing

### Valley Students Raise Money, Swing Hammers for 2 Local Projects

By Kim Wilmath

Valley News Staff Writer

**Lebanon** --For this group of twenty-somethings, manual labor is a respite. Splattering tar, hauling chunks of walls, digging ditches: It's all a nice, easy break from the nearly nonstop pedal pushing that awaits them each morning.

And the best part, they said, is the cause behind it. With each hammered nail or neatly placed shingle, a deserving family is one step closer to a home of its own.

Bike and Build has come to town.

The group is made up of 30 volunteers who bicycle coast-to-coast -- stopping only to eat, sleep and lend a hand to affordable housing construction projects along the way. During

the past two days, the northern U.S.-route group stopped in Lebanon and Norwich to help the Upper Valley Habitat for Humanity at two of its building sites.

Yesterday morning at the Lebanon site, a Dartmouth undergraduate-sponsored project at 364 Meriden Road, bikes were strewn around heaps of dirt that cast shadows on 13 volunteers tacking insulation to the sides of a soon-to-be basement.

“I always wanted to bike across the country, and this seemed like a great way to do it with all we do for the community,” said Derek Su, a 19-year-old Bike and Build volunteer who just finished his freshman year at Dartmouth.

Su said the most challenging part of the trip was raising the required \$4,000 before the ride began -- \$1 for each of the 4,000 miles the group will trek. He gathered funds by going door-to-door and soliciting friends and family. The majority of the money is donated to various affordable housing organizations.

The riders occasionally buy meals, but they limit the expenditure to about a dollar a biker, which means big pots of spaghetti, said Dan Dunbar, one of the group's leaders.

At most stops, churches or community members donate food for the volunteers, which Dunbar said is “really kind of cool” considering “how bad we start to smell.”

Most groups are so generous that 21-year-old Michelle Lopez from Reed College in Portland, Ore., said she might gain weight on the trip despite the thousands of miles she'll bike.

All the riders are assigned certain chore groups along the way, and Lopez said she's happy to be on dinner crew. But she said not every rider gets stuck with an enjoyable task, citing dreaded laundry duty for sweaty bikers.

While Su said he had been training for the bike trip during the school year, Lopez said she wasn't quite as prepared. But she was willing to press on knowing what waited at the next stop -- the building project.

Lopez, who is originally from Houston said she's passionate about volunteer work. When Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana in 2005, she rolled up her sleeves to help relief efforts. She became involved in Habitat for Humanity when she moved to Portland and is happy to be back on a building site.

The upper-body workout to balance out her burning leg muscles is a bonus, she added with a laugh.

Mitch Leonard, a general contractor from Grantham and supervisor of the Upper Valley Habitat for Humanity, said the Lebanon project should be finished in about six months. Twin Pines Housing Trust donated the land, and LaValley Building Supply provided materials, Leonard said. Habitat volunteers work on the site 12 hours a week.

He said the home is being built for a single mom with one daughter, both of whom Leonard met at the groundbreaking ceremony a few weeks ago. "Like anyone who realizes Habitat is getting involved, they became really emotional," he said.

Leonard said he's impressed with the Bike and Build crew's hard work, especially after long hours of cycling.

Isaiah Berg, a 19-year-old Bike and Build group leader and soon-to-be Dartmouth sophomore, called the trip a "perfect fusion" of adventure and service.

Speaking quickly and enthusiastically in a telephone interview yesterday, Berg described the "wonderful machine" that is the bicycle. "I mean, your legs are the engine," he said.

Each day means new scenery, new stories and familiar "Bike and Build smells," Berg said.

"We're dodging the real world for a summer," Berg said. "It really is once in a lifetime, but at the same time, I wouldn't mind doing it again."

Berg and 16 other Bike and Build riders spent yesterday morning at the Habitat's other site in Norwich's Starlake Village.

The home will be known as the 2008 Interfaith house, as it was funded by 20 faith communities in the Upper Valley, according to the Habitat Web site. The structure was designed and donated by Timberpeg, a national company that builds timber-frame homes.

Christopher Hollowell, a 24-year-old group leader from Hornell, N.Y., spent the day helping assemble the building's roof. Hollowell said in a telephone interview that the future owner of the home worked alongside the volunteers, making the experience all the more meaningful.

Hollowell took his first Bike and Build trip in 2006 on a ride across the Midwest. After that, he went to a small village in Senegal, Africa, with the Peace Corps. "Even over there I couldn't get this experience out of my head," Hollowell said of Bike and Build. "It was the best summer I ever had."

And the hardest part of the journey? Knowing it'll be over in a few months, he said. "Though some people would probably say it's the hills."