

The Art of Making Bicycles

Crafting 2,600 One-of-a-Kind Bikes



Kenichi Hotta with one of his unique bicycles

By Tadahisa Hagiwara

Most people have forgotten their first bike-riding experience. Riding a bicycle is something that they probably just take for granted. But there are many people who can only look on in envy at others zipping around on their bikes—namely, people with disabilities.

“For people with disabilities, bicycles can open a whole new world,” says Kenichi Hotta of Hotta Manufacturing in Tokyo’s Adachi ward. For the past 37 years, Hotta and his small factory have created three- and four-wheeled cycles for senior citizens and people with disabilities. He has built over 2,600 cycles for customers ranging in age from three to ninety-five. The first cycle he made was for his own son, whose school prohibited its pupils from riding bicycles. Hotta was really just a hobbyist then, but that first tricycle he built drew favorable attention. Soon, a disabled woman in his neighborhood asked him to make one for her. More and more orders followed. He closed his own family business and started this new venture after purchasing the equipment needed at a low price.

But, after an initial rush, orders tapered off, and he was barely able to make enough to support his family of four. He was on the verge of quitting when he got a message that a boy who had trouble walking would be flying down alone from far-off Hokkaido to see him. Hotta went to the airport to pick him up. He said that tears came to his eyes at the sight of the boy walking toward him with unsteady steps, far behind the group of other passengers leaving the plane. Hotta said that this renewed his commitment. “He had to come all the way here to see me because no one was able to make what he needed! I can’t quit,” he recalled.

Over time, his accomplishments were recognized, and he has received prestigious awards from major corporations and prominent organizations. People come to see him from all over Japan. That is because he has to meet them to customize the design of the cycle to fit their particular needs. Each cycle is “one-of-a-kind,” from the frame to the handlebars, pedals, saddle, gear configuration and position, and whether it is motorized.

Each cycle has over 200 parts, most of which are customized. At times, Hotta must even create the tools



A boy with his new bike

he needs to make the parts. Hotta goes to extreme lengths to find solutions for a great variety of disabilities. He is proud to say that he has never failed to fulfill a customer’s expectations. “I make the best possible product for each and every client who comes along. Then, the next one appears. And so it has been for a long time now. I can’t remember taking any breaks in the past 37 years,” he says.

Customers cry tears of happiness when they see the completed tricycle and break into a smile as soon as they get on. Each photo adorning the walls of Hotta’s workshop tells a story of a memorable experience when a customer first received a cycle.

Asked if he might now be receiving orders from around the world, he smilingly replied, “If they can come all the way here, I’ll be sure to make them the cycle of their dreams.”

Tadahisa Hagiwara has published numerous works on business and the economy.