

The Tetra Society: A creative approach to independence

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When people hear about the **Tetra Society of North America**, their first reaction is often one of surprise. They can't believe that someone would be willing to help them without asking for anything in return. It's something most of us don't see too much of anymore. Yet, that is exactly what Tetra is all about - helping people with disabilities gain independence and improve their quality of life, regardless of their personal resources. It might sound like a big undertaking, but it's happening all over North America, one small project at a time.

A man with a plan

Like most young people, **Sam Sullivan** yearned for freedom and independence. The only difference in Sam's case was that a skiing accident at the age of 19 left him as a quadriplegic. He was on welfare and unable to do much without the help of a care worker. His frustration with this situation prompted him to write a letter to the **Association of Professional Engineers of BC**, asking them for assistance. He was soon contacted by **Paul Cermak**, a professional engineer, and the rest is history.

Now years later, the only help Sam needs at home is someone to do the vacuuming and laundry. About 200 little devices have been invented to make his life easier, everything from a holder to help him retrieve a dropped toothbrush, to Velcro on his wheelchair so he can attach his cellphone. Since forming the Tetra Society in 1992, he has started the [Disabled Sailing Association of BC](#) and [BCMOS](#), which helps disabled people participate in wilderness access challenges. Plus, he's also a Vancouver city councillor.

A concept that's gaining momentum

The Tetra Society currently has about 30 chapters across Canada and the United States, and the organization hopes to expand to 40 in 2004. "Our people here did some research, and with the health system the way it is in the States, we thought that it would probably be beneficial to people with disabilities in the US as well," explains Tetra's national coordinator, **Jim Howard**.

He says some clients don't believe it - someone is going to do something for me for free? It comes as a surprise. What is even more impressive, though, is the multitude of inventions that volunteers have developed in response to the individual needs of these clients. Devices range from communication aids, eating and drinking aids, and household and mobility aids, to special devices that help disabled artists express their own creativity.

"Our volunteers find it very gratifying to actually see a person accomplish a task that we all take for granted," says Howard. "When they put together these devices they see the lifestyle of the

person change as they become more independent. They really care about the people they're trying to help."

Despite positive feedback from volunteers who decide to get involved, Howard admits that it's a big challenge attracting new volunteers to the organization. "Here in Vancouver [Tetra's head office] we have quite a base of volunteers, probably in the neighbourhood of 40-50 volunteers at different times, but it's in the smaller cities across the country where we need to get the message out." They've been getting good responses from radio interviews with chapter coordinators and the various articles that have been published in engineering magazines. "But it's not just engineers that we're after," Howard adds. "We don't want to limit it to somebody that has a formal education, because there might be someone out there who is super creative, almost like an inventor-type. We are reaching out to those people as well."

The benefits are threefold

Obviously, Tetra's clients are the big winners, gaining access to a variety of devices to help improve their life. As for the volunteers, satisfaction comes from helping others but there is also a mentoring aspect built into the program. "We partner new volunteers with an existing volunteer and then the two of them go out together to visit the client and evaluate the situation," says Howard. "Some people shy away from people with disabilities; they don't understand. So the mentoring is a good thing." It is also a great way of creating awareness about disabilities and the many challenges that disabled people face everyday.

There is a third beneficiary of Tetra's efforts as well, namely the government. Take Sam's case for example. He was on welfare and had to have care workers come in to do everything for him. "You can imagine that by the person with the disability being able to be self-sufficient, probably being able to go to work, not having to be on welfare, and not needing so much assistance from care workers, that the savings to the government can be astronomical," Howard points out. "So it's definitely a big, big plus for everyone, including the government."