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Volunteer engineer helps MS woman reach Everest

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By chris stephenson

A Salt Spring engineer has utilized his talents to assist a woman with multiple sclerosis (MS) ascend to Mount Everest's base camp in November.

Derek Emmerson is a retired mechanical engineer who worked in the aircraft industry. He works with the Tetra Society of North America, a group of volunteer engineers and technicians who design and create devices for people with physical disabilities.

"What Tetra tries to do is resolve day-to-day problems," he said. "In some cases I do things outside of the day-to-day."

Tetra was originally conceived in the mid-1980s by Vancouver's current mayor Sam Sullivan. A quadriplegic since the late 1970s, Sullivan felt the need for independence due to his limitations. The organization has grown across Canada with chapters as far east as Prince Edward Island. Emmerson saw the need on Salt Spring and opened shop in 1995.

His projects include a lifting chair to elevate physically challenged people to counter level. As well, he modified the TrailRider, a folding chair and wheel device designed to help people with physical limitations explore the outdoors. The chair is pushed and pulled along the trail by other hikers.

Emmerson modified the TrailRider after problems developed with the braking system.

"I thought the chair could use a second brake to relieve the stress on the first brake."

Pippa Blake, who has MS, will use the modified TrailRider as she ascends to Mount Everest base camp next month.

Blake and her group trained on Salt Spring Monday, trekking up an old logging road near the Mill Farm.

“It worked very well.” Emmerson added, “it requires a fair amount of effort though.”

Emmerson said the trek in Nepal is inspiring and he hopes the adventure in November pushes others in similar situations to do something more.

Emmerson is content with his part in the journey, though. He won't join the crew in Asia, but will continue his work here with Tetra. “It's an enjoyable pursuit.”

For anyone interested in the Tetra Society on Salt Spring, contact Emmerson by e-mail at demmerson@shaw.ca.

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