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Engineering society gives a local man a second chance at his favourite pastime

By Michelle Osmond



James Scurry is learning to play guitar again, thanks to the Tetra Society.

For five years, James Scurry hasn't been able to play his guitar. In 2001, he had a brain aneurysm that caused a stroke. It left him without the ability to move his left side and although he was an avid musician, he gave up hope of ever playing again. That is, until the Newfoundland Tetra Society, founded and coordinated by Memorial engineering professor Dr. Leonard Lye, heard about it.

The Tetra Society is an award winning volunteer organization of engineers, technicians, and health professionals who design and build assistive devices for people with disabilities.

Dr. Lye says Mr. Scurry's challenge was perfect for the society and what it stands

for. He enlisted new volunteers and engineering students Gillian Langor, Steven Coward, and Steve Reddin. The volunteers consulted an occupational therapist to find out what Mr. Scurry could and couldn't do then found out what the client wanted. They also worked with Griffiths Guitar Works who made modifications to the guitar, and with Memorial's Technical Services who constructed the prototype.

"It's a trial and error process. First, coming up with a rough prototype before getting a proper one made in the machine shop then there was more fiddling until we got a system that worked reasonably well," explained Dr. Lye.

It works using the up-and-down motion of the pick which is controlled by a foot pedal of a high-hat stand, which is used by drummers. The pick is attached to a spring loaded lever arm and when the pedal is pushed down, a bike cable pulls the lever arm up and the pick moves downwards to strum the guitar. When the pedal is let go the spring

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mechanism pulls the lever arm and the pick strums upwards. So the speed of strumming is controlled by foot movement.

Ms. Langor says it was an amazing learning experience for the volunteers.

"The Tetra Society has a lot to offer us. It's a chance for students to become involved by reaching out to our community and at the same time, we get to work with professionals and learn a lot from them. It helps us see a little outside of our curriculum."

Mr. Coward agrees and says it was definitely worth the effort.

"When a project comes up, it sounds interesting but it's not until you see the guy who needs it and how much he wants it that you say to everyone 'We should really go forward this and get it done quickly.' It really strikes home then."

Dr. Lye said the client was overjoyed when they brought him the first prototype. "He wanted to take it home that very night when we let him try it although it wasn't complete yet. His wife had tears in her eyes. He was quite overcome with emotions that night. He did not realize that it would work that well."

"I was surprised the first time I played it," says Mr. Scurry. "It was unbelievable." He doesn't know if he'll ever play the way he used to but says from now on, he'll be practicing "day and night."

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