



THE MISSISSAUGA NEWS

Problem solvers help disabled

JOHN STEWART
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It's not that often that you get to see, right before your eyes, how you have really changed another person's life for the better.

Manfred Luther has experienced that feeling.

As a volunteer for the Peel chapter of the Tetra Society, Luther was once faced with the challenge of developing a device so that a quadriplegic woman, who was almost completely bedridden, could change the channels on her TV set.

The retired tool and die maker came up with alterations to a pneumatic "sip and puff" tube which allowed her to suck or blow into the tube to move the channel buttons up or down on her remote.

"When we got it working, she didn't stop changing channels for quite a while," said the 66-year-old who still volunteers for the local group, even though he lives 90 minutes away.

The woman then thanked him for helping to resolve a domestic dispute: Her husband could no longer refuse to change the TV channels when they'd had a fight.

Marital conflict resolution isn't usually one of the benefits of Tetra's projects, but they do significantly change the course of some peoples' lives.

Glenn Barnes, Ontario marketing and funding co-ordinator and the manager of Peel Tetra, said the organization's work can help people go to school, get and keep jobs, and even win medals in the Paralympics.

Adjusting a wheelchair to take a laptop computer allowed one girl to attend Sheridan College while Mississaugan Robert Hall has competed in many disabled athletic events using a special throwing chair devised by Tetra.

Barnes, 36, who became a quadriplegic after a 1992 diving accident, said, "so many people take so many little things for granted. When you don't have it and then you get it back, the significance is really beyond words."



Staff photo by Rob Beintema

Working it out -- Just a simple innovation but the "arm exercise bike" is just one example of the solutions found when Glenn Barnes and his Tetra organization uses volunteer engineers to solve special challenges for the disabled.

As an example, the Lakeview resident demonstrates a keyboard tool that his father Sam, a Tetra volunteer, created for him. By drilling a hole in a pencil and inserting a small dowel, Barnes can now type much more quickly and accurately on his computer without having the pencil slide down and through his fingers. "It's been a Godsend," he said.

Tetra, started in Vancouver by Sam Sullivan, now has 30 chapters in Canada and six in the U.S.

It is financed by grants from a variety of sources, none of which are permanent, so Barnes spends a lot of his time applying for new funding.

Many of its projects don't require a lot of ingenuity, just some imagination. By scavenging at salvage and discount supply stores, Tetra volunteers can make cribs that are accessible for mothers in wheelchairs or Nintendo Games that a disabled youngster can play.

"We make the small things easier," said Barnes. "It's a tough way to change the world -- one person at a time -- but we do our best."

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