

The Wheel to Walk Canada Athletes

Wheeling across the country on specialized bicycles is a major physical undertaking for anyone, let alone someone confined to a wheel chair. However, the months of exhausting training, the pain and the sacrifice will all be worth it because the four paraplegics hand cycling across Canada know deep in their hearts that within five to 10 ten years they will be able to walk again. After exhaustive investigation of their own, they have put their trust and support behind the breakthrough Canadian research team that was the only one in the world to repair a mature spinal cord injury in rats. Since they have such a huge personal stake in the success of this research, they are backing it 100%. Not only do they strongly believe that they and others will be able to walk again because of this research, but they also believe that it will also impact significantly on the lives of those with strokes, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and other neurological diseases.

Having emigrated from Slovenia to Canada in 1962, team leader Charlie Cetinski, 65, is particularly proud to be Canadian. Like his fellow wheel chair athletes he is equally proud of the accomplishments of the Canadian research team that his colleagues are backing. "Canada is so close to becoming the first in the world to help people walk again and to impacting on other neurological diseases. Canadians should be very proud of these accomplishments", says Cetinski.

Other groups fund work to make people live better with spinal cord injuries. The McMaster-based group is the only one focused on making people live better without these injuries. That in itself is a huge difference.

Charlie Cetinski

Charlie, 65, is a very active individual and has enjoyed many varied experiences both in his career and his personal life. A master electrician by trade, he is a successful entrepreneur leaving his mark not only in the industrial electrical contracting industry but also as chair of Flamboro Springs Water. He has consulted on several significant projects in Ontario like the first toll highway 407 and the District Energy Project for Markham Hydro. Charlie balances his entrepreneurial drive with a love of flying, nature and music. In 1992 he and his close friend Stuart Loten won first place in the 50th Anniversary Alaskan Trans Canada Highway Float Plane competition which challenged its competitors from all around the world to complete a specified route with uncompromising skill, precision and timing.

Charlie's life, however, would take a tragic turn in 1997. Shortly after take off during a routine test flight, the aircraft he was piloting crashed and Charlie was seriously injured, sustaining third degree burns and a spinal cord injury. This did not change Charlie's incredible drive and spirit. Shortly after he was released from the hospital he founded the Golden Horseshoe Marathon, a one-of-a-kind event to raise awareness about the challenges of living with spinal cord injury and funds for spinal cord research. In 1992 Charlie, along with another team member broke the world record by completing 10 consecutive wheelchair marathons!

Les McLaughlin

Les just turned 50, a milestone year for anyone, let alone someone wheeling across the country to help others suffering from neurological diseases. Helping others is part of his nature. As a member of the Lions Club and as an active participant in the Golden Horseshoe Marathon, Les has helped raise many dollars to help others. But his past history of giving has only laid the groundwork for the major undertaking that will mark his half century celebration.

Not only does Les work full time as a system performance technician for Toronto Hydro where he tests various programs, when his work day is done, he trains almost three hours a night with his hand cycle mounted on rollers.

Previous to his accident, which took place in 1999, Les was an Emergency Response Technician for Toronto Hydro, who enjoyed jogging, canoeing, bike riding, horseback riding and camping, to name but a few of his favourite activities. After his accident, Les underwent two operations and one year of intense rehabilitation. He is wheelchair bound but was able to return to work in November, 2001. Today he still enjoys computers, canoeing, hand cycling and camping amongst a variety of other activities. Les has served as the captain of the Golden Horseshoe Marathon team for the last five years.

Les very much wants to help draw attention to this Canadian research and by doing so, help others. He is more than aware of the immense physical and psychological changes that take place when your life is turned upside down by a spinal cord injury. "Many people do not bounce back, live on government assistance and their growth stops", he says. "Just imagine this", he says. "You hear about a major car crash with multiple deaths and injuries, yet a few months later hear about those who had been paralyzed walking again. That reality is right around the corner. Just imagine the impact it would have on people's lives and the pressure it would take off our health care system.

"Even after wheeling out in blizzards, snow and later in intense heat to raise money, when you see the faces of those you're helping, the huge sacrifice we make is well worth it", he says.

Chuck Mealing

Feisty forty-three-year-old Chuck Mealing has been a paraplegic since he suffered an accident at the Crystal Beach Amusement Park in Fort Erie in 1982. At the age of 18, Chuck felt that his life was over. "I was wrong," he says. "My family and friends made me see that life still goes on.

Never one to like sports – his only physical activity had been playing Frisbee – Chuck now enjoys physical activities such as marathons, scuba diving, biking, swimming and boating. But it was not always like that. Despondent about never being able to walk again, Chuck had drowned his anger and pain in drugs and drinking, losing friends along the way and straining family relationships. Suddenly one day, he realized that his attitude needed a major readjustment and, much to his credit, he made it and has never looked back.

Happily married for the past 13 years, Chuck builds houses and decks from his wheel chair.

Chuck is anxious to use his natural feistiness to push his three team mates as they wheel across the country. As the fastest of the four and the person bringing up the rear of the pack, Chuck takes great pride in keeping his team mates on pace.

Is he looking forward to participating in the Wheel to Walk Canada tour? “You bet. I want to make sure that nobody else spends their valuable youth in a wheelchair.”

Harvey Uppal

Entrepreneur Harvey Uppal believes that the Canadian research he and his colleagues are backing “is a miracle in the making”.

Harvey, 50, could serve as an inspiration for us all; not only as a diversely skilled individual, but for his courage in the face of adversity. Born in Britain, Harvey immigrated to Vancouver in 1977. A trained industrial electrician, he assumed the position as head electrician for a local mill. As testament to his entrepreneurial nature, Harvey also began a mushroom farm in 1981. Happily married and the proud father of three, Harvey had little idea his life was about to change. In 1989, Harvey was involved in a serious accident. Pinned under a piece of heavy equipment, he was left irrevocably paralyzed. A man of unshakeable spirit, Harvey continued to run his business despite his injury. Harvey and his family relocated to Burlington, Ontario in 1991 where he bought and continues to manage a motel. Harvey has also become an active participant in the Golden Horseshoe Marathon through his friendship with founder Charlie Cetinski. Thus far, he has taken part in three marathons and he trains 40 to 50 km every day. Harvey is a very active individual especially in supporting any scientific research that may lead to a cure for spinal cord injury.

Like his fellow wheel chair athletes, Harvey is very impressed with the research team’s regeneration of the nerves and the insulation that forms around the nerves. “This is not a promise. It is a reality and I feel as if I am going to climb Mount Everest in a wheelchair”, he says. “We are proud to be backing such a solid, proven foundation of medical advancement. It is the most promising research out there.” Harvey has been a wheelchair for 15 years and until recently felt that there was no hope of ever walking again. When asked what message he wants to give Canadians, he says, “This is not just hope, this is reality.”