Eliot inventor produces wheelchair for the great outdoors

By Karen Crouser

Now that spring is finally here again, outdoor enthusiasts with mobility impairments may want to check out a new, all-terrain wheelchair that recently hit the market.

Eliot resident John Rackley officially launched his new business, Renegade Wheelchairs, via the web on Feb. 1, with the introduction of his new invention, the Renegade ultimate all-terrain wheelchair.

Rackley designed and used this model for three years, before deciding to venture out on his own and market it to the public.

His past motivated him

A former cabinetmaker, Rackley became a quadriplegic nearly a decade ago, after sustaining a C5-C6 spinal-cord injury during an accident. An avid hunter and fisherman prior to his accident, Rackley found it difficult to navigate the rough terrain and snow that blankets the Northeast for much of the year.

In a standard wheelchair, Rackley discovered it was often a challenge just to get around in his yard. “I know what it’s like,” Rackley said. “I’m in the same position as everyone else [with disabilities] now.”

After giving up on his outdoor pursuits for a time, Rackley came up with a solution — a seven-speed, gear push-bar system enabling the user to propel the chair in any direction without ever touching the wheels.

The gear design is similar to older-model bicycles, the inventor explained. Users switch gears according to the type of surface they are negotiating.

Rackley said this system could navigate rough ground, as well as snow and beach sand, if the user has the capability and stamina to take on those obstacles. When not in use, the push-bars can be stored under the wheelchair seat and the chair propelled manually.

The business

Rackley purchases his chairs from a supplier and subcontracts specific modifications to a welder. Renegade Wheelchairs is a one-man operation. However, the entrepreneur added, he hopes to expand and bring his daughter into the business.

Both traditional and hunting models are available. Standard features include: a rigid 1-inch aluminum frame; seven-speed sealed internal gears with internal drum brake; two push-bars; under-seat, push-bar storage; 24-inch wheels with 2-inch wide, knobby Kendra tires; 8-inch front casters; adjustable foot and backrest; and left, right, and rear accessory receivers.

Both models can be purchased in widths from 14 to 18 inches. The traditional model has several color choices.

Rackley said he would soon be offering additional accessories, such as a lap desk, attachable fishing-rod holder and gun rack, and rear wheely bars.

The base price of this new sporty wheelchair is $3,995, plus an additional $200 for shipping.

Since each chair is a custom order, consumers should expect to receive the chair in eight to 10 weeks.

More information is available at renegadewheelchairs.com. Rackley can be reached directly at john@renegadewheelchairs.com or 439-3339.

Everyday fitness for people with disabilities

By Kris Dorer

People of all abilities, including seniors and people with disabilities, can gain significant health benefits from a moderate amount of physical activity, preferably as part of a daily routine.

Lack of physical inactivity is a major risk factor for developing coronary artery disease and stroke. It also contributes to other risk factors, including obesity, high blood pressure, a low level of HDL (“good”) cholesterol and diabetes.

Exercise can improve your quality of life and help you to maintain your independence. Don’t forget the social and emotional benefits. You will also feel great about yourself.

People with disabilities or limited mobility may be less likely to engage in regular moderate exercise. You may find you do not know how to adapt exercises to your own abilities, think of exercise as another “medical” part of your life, or maybe just do not know where to start.

Still, you can enjoy physical activity and benefit from moderate activities, such as gardening, walking, or using a wheelchair.

Shorter sessions of more intense activity, such as an aerobic class or wheelchair basketball may be appropriate.

Adapting exercise routines

With the help of professionals and a creative approach, almost any exercise or recreational activity can be adapted. Even people with fatigue challenges, such as those with multiple sclerosis or fibromyalgia, can learn how to monitor their energy level so they can start a progressive fitness program.

Proper alignment and execution of your body is crucial to avoid injury, so learn how to do exercises properly.

There is a difference between physical therapy and exercise. Physical therapy is often of limited duration. Exercise and fitness are lifelong pursuits that should incorporate daily activities that will help you be as healthy as you can be.

A fitness program is a natural “next step” to allow you to maintain the gains you’ve achieved through a rehab program.

Seek professional advice

Start by informing your physician you would like to undertake an exercise program. Ask about the effects of any medication on exercise. Seek out a qualified physical therapist or personal trainer to conduct a few simple tests to help you determine your current level of fitness and formulate a personalized exercise plan.

Contact any health organizations familiar with your condition to explore referrals to local gyms or trainers.

Everyone is somewhere on a spectrum of ability vs. disability. Some of us are stronger in some parts of our bodies and weaker in others.

It is important to be aware of your body, even during light or moderate activity. If you feel overheated, short of breath, or have other unusual symptoms, stop and consult with your professional team.

Consult with a professional to design your program, then you will be able to maintain it for a lifetime.”

— Kris Dorer