

NEWS



A thalidomide baby born with short limbs, Ramesh Lad drove across Canada with help from Vancouver engineer Jay Drew. Photo-Adam Proskiw

Disabled Lad hits road with help from Tetra friends

By Cheryl Rossi-Staff writer

If it wasn't for the gizmos a volunteer built for his road trip last summer, Ramesh Lad wouldn't have been able to explore Canada on his own. With the safety of an extended steering wheel and the convenience of a bath transfer board, Lad was able to enjoy an adventure while turning some heads.

"Travelling is one of my biggest passions," said Lad, who moved to Vancouver from England four years ago.

Born with extremely short and irregularly shaped limbs as a consequence of the morning sickness drug thalidomide, Lad needs various devices to make his daily activities safe and convenient. Lad sits close to his steering wheel when he drives. He knew even a minor accident could trigger the airbag and he knew this could be dangerous for him. But he couldn't find anyone who would disable it. Expecting to find himself in rural roads in Newfoundland where moose are known to dash in front of cars, Lad didn't want a minor accident to turn into a major hazard.

Lad called in the Tetra Society of North America, an organization founded by Coun. Sam Sullivan, that recruits volunteer engineers, designers and occupational therapists to create assistive devices for people with significant disabilities. Tetra paired him with Jay Drew, one of Vancouver Tetra's 48 volunteers.

Lad described the two aids he needed and Drew designed them. Drew built a second steering wheel that clamps onto the regular one, sitting three or four inches from the original. He also built an unfolding transfer table, the size of a chess board when the table's folded, and the size of a mini coffee table with retractable and adjustable legs when extended.

With these devices, Lad set off on a solo journey.

When he'd roll into a hostel or hotel and ask for a room, clerks would often assume he wanted a room for two, "because they're automatically expecting a companion to be with you, someone to help you," he said.

"One fellow, it was in the middle of nowhere, so like unless I came off a space ship this guy was wondering how in the hell did I get there."

Lad ended up taking the man out to his car and showing him how it had been set up. "I think I got a free night in the hotel for that."

Lad drove from Vancouver to Newfoundland, zigzagging across the country and then headed back through the States. On his way to Mount Rushmore he kept spotting packs of burly bikers.

At a roadside stop a group watched him get out of the back of his car, unfold his wheelchair, get in it, grab the specially adapted walking sticks he maneuvers it with and roll off. They too wanted to see how he drives his car.

"They were just amazed. I mean there they are with all these fancy bikes and things and I've got my Ford Focus station wagon."

The bikers invited Lad to their annual rally in Sturgis, S.D. and he went. "It was quite funny, like all these shiny Harleys and, you know, all these rough looking guys and women on bikes, and there's me in my Ford Focus station wagon following them, a little Meatloaf playing in my car as I'm going along."

Without the help of Tetra and Drew, Lad wouldn't have these stories to tell.

"When they take on a project they take it on 100 per cent with all their skills and everything else in tow. Without it, there'd be a lot of people that would miss out on some good stuff out there."

Sullivan founded Tetra almost 20 years ago after a skiing accident left him paralyzed. Instead of relying on others for assistance, taxing the healthcare system and collecting social assistance, Sullivan uses 200 devices to help maintain an active lifestyle.

"He's been able to become an independent citizen and a city councillor. He just received the Order of Canada. It all started with him contacting an engineer friend who designed a device for him," said Jim Howard, Tetra's national program manager.

Since its start, Tetra and its volunteers have helped more than 2,500 people overcome barriers. People seeking an assistive device or to volunteer should phone Pat Tweedie at 604-688-6464, ext. 108.

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