

Small contributions bring Big Smiles

Cutting a few inches off a child's tricycle may not sound like a major engineering project, but it has made a world of difference to a youngster with restricted growth.

Tetra Halifax volunteer Bill Rudolph, of Herring Cove, Nova Scotia, was asked to make the modifications to enable a five-year-old boy to ride by himself. The boy is the size of a one-and-a-half year old, and his parents were unable to buy a suitable trike – there was nothing commercially available in his size range, so they turned to Tetra for help.

Founded in 1987, The Tetra Society of North America is an independent non-profit that recruits skilled technical volunteers to design and fabricate custom assistive devices for people with disabilities.

Rudolph, 59, has been volunteering with the non-profit for the past year since he retired, simply because he finds the projects interesting. His specialty is "anything with wheels" and his signature is producing something that looks professionally finished.

Take for instance the trike project – it took hours of work in the shop to cut it down to size, but you would not guess that it was anything other than a commercial model.

"Originally, there was a five-inch gap between his foot and the pedal," said Rudolph. "I did everything I could to cut that bike down. It was a quarter-inch here, a half-inch there, and in places it was a sixteenth, but eventually I had it so he could ride it."

He turned the frame upside down and reassembled the parts onto this (saving somewhere between three and four inches), cut down the forks, headset and handlebars. . . anywhere he could make a difference.

But the real neat touch was producing something that looked exactly like a production trike, even down to replacing the decals in new positions. "If you do a job it has to look good, and I wanted him to be proud of his new tricycle."

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ABOUT TETRA

The purpose of Tetra is to recruit skilled volunteer engineers and technicians to create assistive devices for people with disabilities. This unique program was developed in response to difficulties that people with disabilities experience in their search for greater independence and integration within their communities. The solutions are often simple but can change someone's life.

Tetra recognizes that people are not handicapped by their disabilities but by obstacles or barriers in their living environment. Volunteer engineers, design technicians, and health professionals work one to one with their clients to make assistive aids or modifications to their environment so that greater independence can be achieved. This site offers a sampling of the projects we have completed.

The reward for all this effort came from watching the boy try out the trike. "He doesn't have speech, but I got some squeals," said Rudolph.

It is still a work in progress, as this dedicated volunteer next needs to raise the handlebars a little to clear the boy's knees.

Another recent Bill Rudolph bicycling project was for a young man with balance and mobility problems. He enjoyed riding a tricycle, but found that it kept tipping. Rudolph added a fourth wheel.

And the finishing touch? He found a machinist to cut the cycle's name into the heads: *Tetracycle*.

Tetra was founded in Vancouver, BC, in 1997, and now has more than 300 volunteers organized into 39 chapters across North America, including chapters in three of the four Atlantic provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador). Tetra volunteers have completed more than 3,000 projects.

Christine Plourde, P. Eng. has volunteered as Fredericton Tetra Chapter coordinator since 2000 and finds it extremely rewarding. Born and raised in Charlottetown, Christine is anxious to see more Islanders benefit from Tetra. Tetra is currently searching for someone interested in helping to start a chapter in Prince Edward Island.

Plourde explained that the strength of the organization is that the needs of two groups are met: people with disabilities receive an "enabling" device, while skilled volunteers get an opportunity to exercise their creativity and ingenuity to make a difference for someone.

"It's a win/win situation; Tetra simply acts as the catalyst."



Wheels: Tetra volunteer Bill Rudolph gives this young boy his first trike.



Before: a regular, Wal-mart child's trike.



Afterwards: a custom, one-of-a-kind tricycle.



Quad bike: Another Bill Rudolph Tetra project, this the four-wheeled "Tetracycle".