



Tetra Society: Innovative Solutions for Independence

by Lori Batcheller

Never underestimate the solutions that a group of dedicated volunteers can develop to improve the lives of people with disabilities. Take, for instance, 8-year-old Kyle Sorensen II, who became a high-level quadriplegic from a car accident. Volunteer engineers from the Tetra Society designed a unique sip ‘n’ puff controller that enables Kyle to play with an electric train set.

“Puffing into the controller moves the train forward,” explains Kent Redmund, who just last year agreed to head a new Salt Lake City Tetra Society chapter for a group of engineers from Autonomous Solutions. Additional puffs make the train move progressively faster. A sip slows it down, or backs it up if it’s at rest.

The project was a win-win situation for everyone involved.

“Kyle gets to interact and play with his friends, and we get the satisfaction of knowing we’ve been able to use our skills to make a difference in someone’s life,” says Kent.

The Utah chapter is just one of over 45 Tetra Society chapters throughout North America dedicated to improving the quality of life for people with disabilities. Founded in 1992 by Sam Sullivan, a frustrated quadriplegic who yearned for more independence, last year Tetra Society volunteers created over 300 solutions to challenges faced by people with disabilities. Volunteers provide their services free of charge. Sometimes a materials fee is involved, but more often than not, local businesses donate the supplies.

While engineers and physical or occupational therapists make up many of the chapter members, people with all sorts of skills contribute to the organization. Projects range from the more spectacular recreational devices, such as sit skis or bicycles, to cell phone or cup holders that improve independence with activities of daily living.

“Sometimes the challenge for a person with a disability is how to brush one’s teeth or hold a cell phone,” explains National Program Director Pat Tweedie. “A more unique challenge was helping a boy with progeria—a disease that produces rapid aging—play recorder. The volunteers put extensions on the recorder so that the boy could play music with his classmates.”

The possible challenges—and solutions—are as endless as the unique individuals who ask for assistance: a cello bow guide; a sewing machine arm; a foot strap that enables a bocce ball enthusiast to play in the local league; an electronic easel; and a larger-than-average tandem bike seat are just a few of the projects that volunteers happily addressed. A nonprofit organization, the Tetra Society only makes assistive devices that aren’t available in the marketplace. And if they can’t come up with a solution, the Tetra Society refers people to other resources.

The Tetra Society is always looking for more people to assist as well as skilled volunteers to serve them. Just recently, Lana Zotman, who became disabled from working at a computer, started a new chapter in San Francisco. She and her engineer husband look forward to helping people identify how their lives can be improved and coming up with solutions.

“In many cases, people don’t know what they need, and their independence diminishes,” says Lana. “I feel it’s important to help people become less dependent and increase their quality of life.”

For more information, visit www.tetrasociety.org

[<http://www.disaboom.com/Living/techandtools/tetra-society-innovative-solutions-for-independence.aspx>]