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Tetra in Action: an Occupational Therapist's Perspective

By Garry Angus, B.Sc.

Since its inception in 1987, the Tetra Society of North America has been radically improving the quality of life for people with disabilities. The non-profit society, with chapters across North America, provides ingenious cost-effective adaptive devices "tailor-made" to client's abilities, limitations and needs. It could be something as simple and liberating as an adapted butter knife so a person with high-level quadriplegia can make his or her own toast; something as engineered as a bicycle saddle so a little boy with balance challenges can go for a ride with his mom.

It takes a dedicated team of volunteers to bring a Tetra project to life. It starts with the client and their request for "that something" which could possibly allow them greater comfort, freedom and liberation to participate more fully in life. From book holders to aid severely arthritic limbs, to bumpers for wheelchair soccer leagues, Tetra has been there. Tetra is the engineers, technicians, rehabilitation and occupational therapist advisors who breathe life into the blueprints; make what isn't on the market, and make it safe for the client's use.

Key in the equation is that the Tetra team creates adaptive devices unique to the individual at a reasonable cost, filling the very real void where there is no commercially available solution. It may just take a modification of an item in the marketplace. It may take a complete fabrication using custom built or readily available materials.

Thanks to crucial input from its occupational therapist advisors, the Tetra team has the experience and ability to



Thanks to Tetra, a little boy can go cycling with his mom.

source existing devices for suitability and see that modified objects are safe for use within the client's environment. It is the occupational therapist advisor who will mediate between the engineer and client from the first consultation, to design, to delivery.

It is the occupational therapist's unique perspective that brings the team to the finish line. Enter Jill Harburn, Tetra Society occupational therapist advisor (Vancouver Chapter, October 2002 to October 2003.)

Harburn grew up in Alberta, completing a degree in physical education at the University of Alberta. She specialized in sports performance and sports psychology. At the prompting of her mother, she investigated a career in occupational therapy. While taking the prerequisite

courses, participation in an accessibility project for a young boy at a local middle school helped Jill recognize that she had found her calling. She graduated in 2002 with an interest in environmental adaptations and assistive devices.

Harburn moved to B.C., worked casually as an occupational therapist in the Fraser Valley, and found out about the Tetra Society of North America.

"When I heard about Tetra, it was a good match for what I wanted to do. I saw their information booths at various occupational therapy trade shows and our annual general meetings, so I got involved with the Vancouver chapter." Harburn attended her first meeting that fall.

"It was an interesting event, in that it was mainly engineers who had been doing this for many years, and I was with a group of "non-OTs" who were looking at the
Continued on page 5

INSIDE

- ▶ **President's Message, 2**
- ▶ **Building Bridges in BC, 3**
- ▶ **News from CAOT, 4**
- ▶ **TOKO Region Update, 5**
- ▶ **Knowledge is Power, 8**