

# Wheelchairs Northwest

Enhancing mobility for wheelchair users in Washington



by Danielle Rhéaume

Some wheelchair users were born physically disabled. Some developed disabling illnesses along the way. Some awaken in a hospital bed barely remembering the accident that paralyzed them forever. These things can happen to loved ones, acquaintances and even the person you know best—you.

Take a moment to consider how being disabled would affect you. Would you be able to keep your job, or even drive your children to school? Retain the quality of life to which you are accustomed? How about the financial cost—could you afford the out-of-pocket expenses beyond what your insurance or Medicaid provide? Could you afford to pay sales tax on the base price of your modestly priced \$8,000 wheelchair? (With a sales tax of 8.9%, that would be \$712.)

### A shameful tax

You may be thinking, “There’s no sales tax on wheelchairs.” While that’s a reasonable assumption—based in compassion and common sense—you are mistaken. Even though Washington allows sales tax exemptions for prescription drugs and items like gun safes, it is one of only three states in the country to apply sales tax to wheelchairs and other prescribed durable medical and mobility enhancing equipment.

“When I go to national conferences, other people in the medical field

**Public speaker, extreme sports athlete and marketing professional Barry Long steers his wheelchair, outfitted with Magic Wheels, up a hill.**

Photos on this page courtesy of Magic Wheels

are flabbergasted that Washington taxes these items,” said Wendell Matas, co-owner and president of Wheelchairs Northwest in Bellevue. “They just can’t believe it.”

Apparently, the Disabled American Veterans of Washington, the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, the Brain Injury Association of Washington, the Northwest Parkinson’s Foundation and many other patient advocacy groups can’t believe it, either. More than that, they won’t stand for it. They, along with Matas and many others, are dedicated to seeing this egregious tax removed.

They want Washington “to join countless other states that provide this tax relief to our elderly and disabled populations that struggle with long-term illnesses and diseases while being cared for at home,” said Thomas Coogan, President of Pacific Association for Medical Equipment Services in recent letters to both the state House and Senate. This was after the companion bills calling for removal of this tax failed to make it to the floor of their respective legislative bodies for the eighth year in a row.

Maybe Washington’s decision makers have failed to move these bills because they prefer taxing, instead of fostering the health and well-being of disabled citizens.

It could also be that they would rather stifle than support highly specialized businesses like Wheelchairs Northwest that exist to meet disabled citizen’s unique and often extensive needs.



**Magic Wheels mounted on a Sunrise Medical Quickie wheelchair.**

### Preventing injuries and providing mobility

The importance of custom wheelchairs should not be underestimated. When able-bodied people sit in uncomfortable chairs, work in unsound conditions or even toss and turn the night away on a dilapidated old hide-a-bed, they can usually adjust their positioning and alleviate their pain. A person confined to a wheelchair often doesn't have the same capability.

They certainly can't just get up and walk away from the pain. Even if they are uncomfortable, some lack the ability to adjust their positioning, or even a voice to ask for help. Those with spinal cord injuries might not have sitting sensation and notice the spinal curvatures, nerve damage or other potentially life-threatening conditions developing on their already-vulnerable bodies.

One of the greatest risks for those in wheelchairs is decubitus ulcers—also known as pressure sores or bedsores. These sores are areas of damaged skin and tissue that develop rapidly when sustained pressure cuts off circulation. Once they develop, they can be difficult to treat.

Complications from a pressure sore are what killed actor and quadriplegic Christopher Reeve. Even though he had excellent care, he developed a severely infected bedsore, which resulted in a serious systemic infection. This infection then led to a heart attack and coma from which he was unable to recover.

Reeve's story is tragic for many reasons—particularly because sores like the one that killed him, are preventable. "There are no excuses for pressure sores or other injuries from ill-fitting equipment anymore," Matas said. "In this day and age, we know better!"

This is where ergonomics—the science of fitting equipment to people, rather than people to equipment—comes into play.

### Ergonomics: Fitting the wheelchair to the person

In recent years, ergonomics has become a household word, especially as employers have discovered that initial investments in ergonomic workplaces improve health, morale and productivity over the long term. The same is true for those in wheelchairs.

There are no one-size-fits-all solutions for wheelchairs—they must accommodate the unique needs of the user. If they don't, long-term and ongoing health problems may develop. Not only are these complications physically and emotionally taxing, but they also are extraordinarily costly for the client and all related parties. "That's why we get it right from the beginning," Matas said.

Getting it right means that only some of Wheelchairs Northwest's work happens in their Bellevue office, while a considerable amount happens in hospitals, schools and related living facilities—like the Fircrest Residential Rehabilitation Center where Mike Peterson, general manager of Wheelchairs Northwest, regularly visits.

This center, known to many as the Fircrest School, is located in Shoreline and provides care to about 200 people with severe developmental disabilities. Here, Peterson can assess a client's custom needs without having them make a potentially arduous journey out of the center.

### Case managers make a big difference

The upside of the health care administration process is working with case managers from private insurance companies like Premera. "They really care about their clients," Matas said. These case managers—many of whom are RNs—work as hubs between different agencies and suppliers, while looking out for their patients' long-term needs. Once again, this means getting it right from the beginning, preventing injuries from inadequate equipment and saving money over time. "I see a giant waste of money when case managers aren't used," Matas said.



Photo by Kim A. Fowler/AWB

**Julio Tomas inventories the many wheelchair parts kept in Wheelchair Northwest's extensive service department.**



Photo by Kim A. Fowler/AWB

**Technician Roy McMullen prepares a power wheelchair for a client.**



Photo by Kim A. Fowler / MWB

**Mike Peterson, general manager of Wheelchairs Northwest, at the firm's Bellevue office.**

Like Matas, Peterson has worked in the field for more than three decades. Both men began their careers at rental companies. Matas began as a teenager at a facility in Southern California, while Peterson started at his father's former company, Cascade Medical.

In 1990, Matas founded Wheelchairs Northwest and only a few years later, Peterson came to work for him. Today, there are 16 staff members. All of them—from their administrative staff to their rehabilitative equipment technicians—are passionate about providing

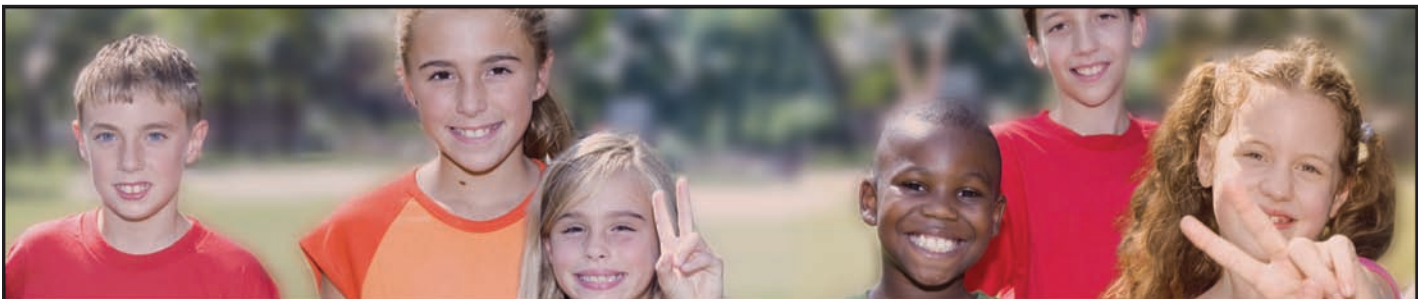
their clients with a level of independent mobility and well being that preceding generations of disabled citizens could only hope for.

"When we fit chairs to clients with degenerative diseases like ALS [Lou Gehrig's Disease] we try to figure out what they need now, while also anticipating what they'll need a year from now." Peterson said. This often requires as many as 12 to 15 custom fittings and two to four hours of prep time in the hands of a qualified technician.

Fortunately, technological advancements in recent years have improved these efforts. Computer imaging, rather than plaster molds, enables manufacturers to fit back and seat cushions to clients with greater accuracy than ever before. Lighter frames and better wheels on manual wheelchairs create less repetitive motion trauma. Advanced user controls—like the sip and puff system for people with limited or no motor capability—allow those who previously would have been dependent on another person's help to move freely on their own.

### **Bureaucracy: Mobility's biggest roadblock**

Even with all of these advances, good old-fashioned taxation and increased bureaucracy—especially bureaucracy associated with the Health Insurance Portability and



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Accountability Act—challenge getting wheelchairs and other custom equipment to disabled citizens.

“Sometimes—and this is especially true for children with neuromuscular diseases—it takes so long for the paperwork and government approval process to go through, the child has outgrown the custom equipment by time it’s funded,” Matas said.

During that time, the child sits crooked, which means that they will grow crooked and then often need orthopedic surgery to correct problems like uneven ribcages, which restrict their lung capacity.

As clients wait for approval, Wheelchairs Northwest endures what Matas describes as “death by process.” Every item, even the battery for a power wheelchair, must be medically justified. Items must also conform to coding that states which equipment goes with what illness. A client with multiple sclerosis might need something that is justifiable only for those with ALS, and so their need for an exception or selection of an alternative piece of equipment must be explained. If the doctor who prescribed the wheelchair simply forgot to sign an M.D. after their name, Medicaid will kick back the order and the process will start over again.

“This business is the opposite of something like a hotdog stand where you can sell the same product year in and year out, without much changing,” Matas said. “Each day we face new articles, new regulations and new codes that we must comply with.” This forces Wheelchairs Northwest and similar businesses to spend the majority of their time on paperwork and less time with their clients. “What the government needs to realize is that the more burdensome and protracted the process, the less time and money can go toward patient’s care. It’s that simple,” Matas said.

Let’s not forget the burden of Washington’s sales tax, which Wheelchairs Northwest often absorbs, along with whatever expenses go beyond allowable amounts set by insurance providers and Medicaid. Still, Wheelchairs Northwest will not compromise their client’s health for profit. “No matter what, our clients always get what they need—even if it creates a loss for us,” Peterson said.

The same principle should drive Washington’s decision makers in 2009. While it’s too late to “get it right from the beginning,” it’s certainly not too late for decision makers to “right a wrong” by dropping the sales tax on wheelchairs and other prescribed durable medical and mobility enhancing equipment. The health and well being of Washington’s disabled citizens—as well as the businesses that serve them—are at stake, and that is something everyone should take personally. ■

## Magic Wheels: Reinventing the wheel



Photo courtesy of Magic Wheels

**Magic Wheels founder Steve Meginnis (right) and mechanical design engineer Cisco Sabin display the 2-gear mechanism that won Magic Wheels the 2007 Business Week Silver IDEA medal.**

Manual wheelchairs have many advantages over power wheelchairs. They are less expensive, lighter, can go almost anywhere and they don’t require batteries or a motor. They also provide cardiovascular exercise for their users, who must use their upper body strength to propel themselves. Even though this exercise often enhances users’ longevity, it can also result in serious and painful repetitive stress injuries like torn rotator cuffs and carpal tunnel syndrome. This is why Sonicare toothbrush co-inventor Steve Meginnis, in consultation with Wheelchairs Northwest President Wendell Matas and other stakeholders, spent more than a decade developing Magic Wheels.

Magic Wheels is a revolutionary two-gear wheel system that fits on most manual wheelchairs and helps to protect and preserve the upper-body strength and function of their users. In high gear the wheels operate just like a standard wheels, but in low gear they become twice as easy propel. This function gives users more control and causes less strain as they climb ramps, pass through door jams and navigate other uneven terrain like gravel or thick grass. Magic Wheels also has a hill-holding feature that keeps the chair from rolling backward, while also eliminating the need for the user to surge their wheelchair after pausing on an incline. These features keep users active and greatly reduce the risk of repetitive stress injuries that compromise their health and drive up medical costs.

These features also allow highly active users like Barry Long, who has done extensive product testing as well as sales and marketing for Magic Wheels, greater personal freedom. If Long hadn’t been in a manual wheelchair after a motorcycle accident paralyzed him from the chest down in 1991, his travels through Europe or his solo journey across Australia might have been impossible. Instead, they are inspiring—so inspiring that schools and various organizations regularly invite Long to speak on issues like overcoming adversity, setting goals and developing a positive attitude.

A positive attitude is something that comes naturally to Long and will continue to come naturally for many other wheelchair users, since Medicare/Medicaid, the Veteran’s Administration Health Care System, and other key funders recently approved Magic Wheels as a medically necessary and justifiable item. With this step in the right direction, manual wheelchairs can continue to expand and grow in proportion to today’s active and adventurous users.

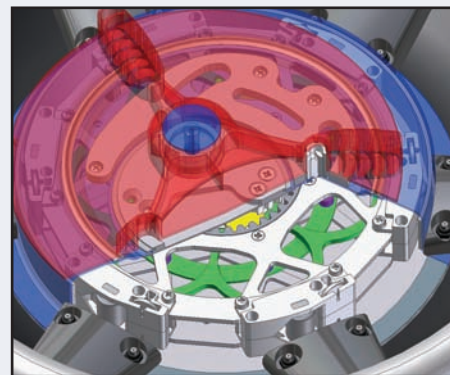


Photo courtesy of Magic Wheels

**A cutaway view of the Magic Wheels mechanism.**

For more information on Magic Wheels, please visit [www.magicwheels.com](http://www.magicwheels.com).  
For more information on Barry Long, please visit [www.talknroll.com](http://www.talknroll.com).