

Chris Schamber can't curb his enthusiasm

You don't have to spend much time with Chris Schamber to figure out he's unique. But not for the reasons you'd think.

Sure, the Lethbridge College grad gets around in a motorized wheelchair that looks like it could do serious damage to anything (or anyone) that dares get in the way, and yes, the car stereo mounted on the right-hand side is unconventional. But the mechanical gadgets and metal in which he functions quickly become insignificant as he explains his story, and more importantly, his life's purpose: accessibility for the disabled.

A raw determination for change and acceptance is visible in his eyes, and of a few things you can be certain: he will make his goals a reality, and he will do everything in his power to make sure the community listens. This is one issue, he says, people had better take sitting down.

At 19, a diving accident left Schamber, originally from Milk River, a quadriplegic. Now 41, he has a positive outlook on life, but he admits his situation was difficult to accept for a long time.

"For the first 10 years, I was fighting depression, and I didn't know what I could and couldn't do because I was a really high-level quadriplegic; I could barely move my arms," he explains. "I used to be independent; now I have to rely on people to put me to bed, get me up and all that kind of stuff."

Despite the circumstances, Schamber realized he would have to relocate to a bigger city in order to get his needs met and reach his full potential; Lethbridge was a natural choice.

"In my condition, there were no real accessible areas in a small town, whereas

in the city they had more access," he says. "There were still a lot of barriers there, but it was easier to find the required staff to help me in my day-to-day living and semi-accommodations at the time."

Shortly after his move, one of Schamber's caregivers encouraged him to return to school. He was initially unsure of this prospect, but he now feels it was one of the best decisions he could have made. In 1998, he enrolled in Lethbridge College's Engineering Design and Drafting program.

"I just went back to college to try to see what I could do," he says. "I enjoyed drafting because I got to see the final product of what I had in mind," he says. "It bestowed in me self-esteem, self-wellness, a sense that I could do this stuff. "College gave me more direction in my life."

Advocacy soon became his clear goal.

"I looked at all the things that were barriers at the time that I faced, but I didn't realize at the time we could change," says Schamber. "So I started drafting some of the barriers up on the computer; I made a couple of presentations."

Schamber began traveling the city, noting accessibility problems and notifying city officials. Then, he decided to start his own business, Quad Design and Barrier Free Consulting.

"I have designed a few accessible accommodations I was hoping I could get some developers to try, but I haven't been too successful as of yet," he says. "But, I've learned if you don't try, you don't know what's going to happen. There's always 'shoulda, woulda, coulda,' or you could say, 'do, done, did.'"

Part of his passion for advocacy

involves educating others on the accessibility struggle many people face.

"I often ask people 'can I take you out and about in a wheelchair and show you stuff?' and that's part of my business," he says. "The best way to get things done is if you put them in a wheelchair and go out and show them firsthand. I'm getting more awareness as my business is progressing. so I'm getting more of a portfolio made."

Schamber began his business due to the severe shortage of accessible housing in Lethbridge. Even the Lethbridge Housing Authority, central clearinghouse for accommodation, has no information on accessible openings.

"There's zero accessible accommodation for people with mobility impairments to live in the community," he says. "I am trying my hardest to open the eyes of the professionals in charge of accommodation."

Accessibility issues in Lethbridge extend far beyond housing, he says.

"I did a presentation with the City of Lethbridge and illustrated that between Swiss Chalet on Mayor Magrath and the ATB [at Sixth Avenue South] there were 75 curb cuts that simulate going over a Safeway speed bump in a car," he says. So, they have made a game plan to shave all the curb cuts within the next couple of years."

Schamber sees the same sorts of problems in other essential-services buildings, such as doctors' offices. But, he says it's important to realize that effective changes take time, and patience is key.

"I am making changes slowly. There are a lot of areas that need to be fixed, and it can't happen overnight, but (the city) needs to make a game plan to do it."

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Chris Schamber

He also feels the college has some improvements of its own to make.

“The one thing I liked [on campus] was the buttons on the front doors had heat sensors so all you had to do was put your hand in front; that was a way better idea than the current push buttons,” he says. “A couple of paved paths around the college would be good; the buttons in the elevator are a little high.”

“My goal is to have people live in inclusion and go out and enjoy their community without having barriers,” he says. “That way, people with mobility

issues can have a . . . better quality of life. For every individual, it’s good to have equal rights to be able to live life with self-fulfilment; accessibility is part of that.”

For Schamber, staying positive is vital to staying healthy.

“Being positive is just a win-win situation. No matter how bad you think you have it, there’s always somebody who has it worse than you.”

Christina Boese (Communication Arts 2008)

Curb appeal:
Chris Schamber smoothes the way

