MOVING FORWARD

Retired physician with a disability fights for the right to get around on a Segway

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BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Dr. Patrick McNamara gets out of his silver minivan and hobbles a few steps, leaning heavily on a homemade wooden cane. There is pain in every awkward movement the 51-year-old makes — until he pops open the trunk and grins.

Dr. McNamara does his grocery shopping on the two-wheeled Segway. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

"In a moment, I will no longer be handicapped," he declares.

The next thing you know, he's zipping around the parking lot like Willy Wonka — he's still holding the cane — using a Segway to run circles around an observer. He continues to show off inside a nearby supermarket, gliding around with ease, pushing a shopping cart, and exhibiting no trace of the nerve ailment that leaves him in severe pain most of the time.

"I'm not disabled when I'm on this," says Dr. McNamara, who has complex regional pain syndrome and retired from internal medicine three years ago. "It's such a completely rehumanizing experience."

That's what interests the Sylvania Township man most. Sometimes the solution is flashy and high-tech, like the Segway he uses to get around. At other times, it's as old-school as the canes that he makes from scratch in his basement workshop.

AUDIO SLIDESHOW
Dr. McNamara talks about his struggle and Segways

It all began when Dr. McNamara injured his back while exercising and found that he had trouble walking even a short distance due to the extreme pain. He investigated all sorts of help: scooters, wheelchairs, hiking sticks, metal canes, but each had its own problem.

"The devices that you use to get around kind of mark you," he says. Consider aluminum canes, for example. "They're ugly, they're cold, they're uncomfortable," he says. "They mark you as someone sick or disabled."

Then he tried a Segway and everything changed.

When the two-wheeled device was unveiled in 2001, it was envisioned as a way to transform car-clogged cities, not as a tool for people with impaired mobility. But that hasn't stopped Jerry Kerr, president of Disability Rights Advocates For Technology in St. Louis, from calling it "one of the greatest things ever designed for people with disabilities."

Mr. Kerr said there are thousands of people who have difficulty walking who use Segways, which move forward simply based on the user leaning in that direction.

Karen A. Whalen, owner of Segway of Ohio: Toledo, says people with disabilities make up about 30 percent of her sales. (Most of the rest come from police and security companies.)

"It really gives them back their lives," she says. "They just get this huge smile."

It's a smile that's seen often on Dr. McNamara's face when he talks about how the invention revolutionized his life, allowing him to go to the store or join his family for his son's baseball games. It also keeps him at eye-level, unlike a wheelchair, which he finds painful.

These days, Dr. McNamara doesn't leave home without his Segway. He keeps it ready to go in the back of his van where, once it's turned on, he can easily roll it down a pair of portable tracks.

"The Segway is, I think, an idea whose time has come for disabled people," Dr. McNamara says.

While federal buildings under the jurisdiction of the U.S. General Services Administration allow Segway use by people with disabilities, not everyone else does, sometimes citing safety concerns. Nationally, the spotlight is on Walt Disney, which prohibits people from bringing personal Segways into its parks.

Locally, it became a kind of quest for Dr. McNamara to make the city more Segway-friendly for the disabled and to raise awareness. He said he hasn't had any trouble at private businesses and worked with the Ability Center of Greater Toledo to gain access to the Metroparks of the Toledo Area.

Getting his Segway into One Government Center proved more difficult. In 2007, Dr. McNamara tried to use his Segway there and was not allowed to in an incident he called humiliating.

The Ohio Civil Rights Commission found probable cause that he was denied access to a place of public accommodation due to his disability in violation of state discrimination law.

"We essentially didn't see that this was all that different from a motorized wheelchair," says spokesman Brandi Martin.

In November, more than a year after the original incident, the Ohio Building Authority, which owns the building, put in effect a new policy regarding Segway use on the same day Dr. McNamara filed a federal lawsuit against it. He has since received a settlement from the OBA.

Dr. McNamara's claim against the other defendant in the lawsuit, Reuben Management, which manages One Government Center, has not been resolved. Lisa L. Nagel, an attorney for Reuben Management, says it enforced existing policy and provided a wheelchair as a reasonable accommodation.

Nationally, access issues don't seem to be widespread. A bigger roadblock is price. Segways start at more than $5,000 and are not covered by health insurance, putting them out of reach for many.

"The Segway was not designed as a mobility device and has not been approved by the FDA as a medical device so we are not allowed to market it as a medical device," says Carol Valianti, a spokesman for Segway Inc.

Fortunately, Dr. McNamara has found lower-tech and less expensive ways to help humanize those with disabilities. After all, the Segway can help him in the grocery store but he still needs something to get him around the house. So he bought some tools a year ago and learned to make wooden canes from scratch.

"It kind of gives me a purpose in life," he says. "I get to make something that's not only comfortable and useful, but also beautiful."

Working downstairs, a stack of wood nearby, he shaves the wood with purpose and molds a cane handle until it conforms perfectly to his hand. The result is something elegant and distinguished.

"I wanted something that was comfortable and attractive and doesn't say, 'sick person,'" he says.

Already Dr. McNamara has donated about a dozen of his creations to the Ability Center and more are in the works. The Ability Center plans to loan them out for a nominal fee.

"I can't practice medicine any longer," he says, "but I have found another way to be helpful to others."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

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