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Accessing the outdoors

By SCOTT CHRISTIANSEN-Frontiersman reporter Mar 12, 2002



Dan McDowell and his son Skyler demonstrate the wheel-chair accessible fishing boat that McDowell had custom built for his fishing guide service on the Kenai River. Photo courtesy Dan

When Wasilla resident Dan McDowell designed a wheel chair accessible boat for his Kenai River fishing guide service, he ended up with a boat that was better for all his customers.

"People don't have to step up and over and down to get into the boat. You don't risk falling in the water," McDowell said. "It's just easier for everybody to use the boat now that I've got it accessible for wheelchairs."

McDowell's boat is eight feet wide and 25 feet long with a flat fishing deck on the bow, and is complete with ramps and removable seats. The fishing deck and the floor have special tie downs and there is diamond plate everywhere a wheel -- or a shoe -- needs traction.

When McDowell noticed that all his customers benefited from his wheelchair-accessible design, he was noticing an effect that people who promote access for the disabled have talked up for years. The physical barriers that stop people in wheelchairs also slow everyone else down. Most people think of steep steps when they think of access, but doors with levers

instead of knobs are another example. Levers not only work better for people without fingers, but they also work better for people carrying packages in both hands. Wider doors also benefit everyone.

"The issue of access is something that is likely to come up in every person's life, whether it's from accidental injury or aging," said Jesse Owens, a wheelchair user who lives in Palmer. "Sooner or later, your mom is going to have a stroke or you're going to have twins and when you're taking a stroller up that step you're going to wish it was a ramp."

Owens is also involved in a business that offers something for disabled people. At his day job, he teaches topics such as cell physiology to first-year medical students at UAA, but he is also the designer of the Kili-Kart, a patented cart designed to take people who can't walk off the beaten path.

Owens was paralyzed in an outdoor accident. He was hit by a snowmobile while skiing near Talkeetna in 1977. Soon after becoming a wheelchair user, Owens discovered how inadequate the chairs are for rolling on anything but flat floors.

"The center of balance is high, wheel base is short, it's narrow, and it has those dinky casters up front ... If you tried to design something worse for going off road it would be really hard," Owens said.

The end result is a bad experience for companions of the person in the chair as well, Owens said.

"It feels really uncomfortable for everyone and nobody wants to experience that ever again," Owens said.

Laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act have changed things somewhat since Owens started using a wheelchair, but he doesn't give Alaskans very high marks.

"If you're in Anchorage, it's about average compared to other places in the U.S. If you're out of Anchorage it's just ungodly difficult," Owens said. "There is an interesting attitude in Alaska and that's that this is a place where men are men and if you can't hack it you'll leave. So it's

just been a battle."

Owens pointed out that businesses with accessible designs at construction avoid expensive retrofitting, and that barriers to people with disabilities also keep their friends and family members from coming into business places with them.

"For every person that isn't able to come in, they lose other customers," Owens said.

McDowell's company, The Last Frontiersman, was also recognized in October as the winner of the Barrier Free Design Award from the Governor's Committee on Employment and Rehabilitation. McDowell also said other Kenai River guides have not only acknowledged his innovations, but cheered him for it. One August afternoon, McDowell received an ovation from other guides who were parked at Bing Brown's landing in Sterling. McDowell is working on a design for a drift boat. He's also been considering tackle options for clients who can't use ordinary rods and reels.

"Now what I need is suggestions about it fishing equipment," McDowell said. "Someone might need a strap so they can fight a big fish from their chair, or someone might need an electric reel."