

Zen And The Eart of Wheelchair Maintenance | CPD

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Libby Higham works on Gordon Richins' power wheelchair at the CPD's Assistive Technology lab.

As an experienced wheelchair user for the last 26 years, I have a strong understanding of how necessary general maintenance and repair is for an expensive power wheelchair. Preventive maintenance and general repairs lessen the chance of a chair failure when an individual is out in the community. I have been very fortunate to not have been stranded from a serious wheelchair malfunction. I owe this good fortune to the Assistive Technology Lab at the Center for Persons with Disabilities. AT Lab technicians and IDASL students have, over time, given my power chair a serious tune-up through general maintenance. This maintenance could be replacing tires, replacing batteries, or repairing other malfunctions, such as a bearing on a wheel that has worn out. The AT Lab also keeps my chair clean and lubricated periodically throughout the year, which is a great advantage, especially in our Cache Valley snowy winters. I am also fortunate enough to be able to afford the cost of new batteries, new tires etc. for my power chair.

"Within the community, I have many friends who are not in that position and have greatly benefited from the

services and assistance they receive from the AT Lab. One individual who uses a power chair never left his home for six months because his chair needed new batteries. When I met him at the Cache Valley Transit District transit center in Logan, he told me the difficulty of having his chair repaired. The vendor that provided the chair was in Salt Lake City and he could not get his chair there for the repairs. When I explained and described the AT Lab to him he was more than thrilled to hear there was an organization that provides service here in Cache Valley.

"My power wheelchair is no different than your car or other mode of transportation. My chair liberates me and opens up endless possibilities of where I can go and what I can do. My wife also loves the fact that I can get out of the house and be a productive member of society and she doesn't have to worry about me all day. As a C-4 quadriplegic, I am unable to drive a vehicle safely, so I greatly rely on my power chair. I also rely on drivers to drive my personal van, the USU motor pool accessible van and public transportation, which are accessible, cost-effective and convenient."

Libby's story

"Over the past year, I have enjoyed learning about disability advocacy through service learning hours as a student in the IDASL program. Thus far, my most memorable service learning experience was working on Gordon's chair at the AT lab with Clay (Christensen) and Cameron (Cressall). Initially, I felt sheepish about working on Gordon's chair, having very little experience with tools or mechanics. However, my concerns faded quickly and I soon found myself completely covered in dirt, grease, and blue glue, laughing alongside Gordon, Cameron, and Clay.

"Over the course of two semesters, I worked on Gordon's chair for a total of 10 hours, during which I learned about wheelchair design and technology, and how to make technology more functional for the individual using it. I changed the tires and the batteries on Gordon's chair, and also made small repairs to improve its safety. For example, I used some Velcro and zip ties to secure the seat cushion, and to conceal and tie down the small wires and tubes on the side of his wheelchair. I also cleaned the small tires on the chair, and fixed squeakiness caused by corrosion of the moving pieces connecting the wheel to the wheelchair.

"Changing the tires and installing new batteries was a surprisingly labor-intensive process and a true test of Gordon's patience and trust in me. Through this experience, I grew to share in Cameron's, Clay's, and Gordon's enthusiasm for a wheelchair's capacity to be

much more than a means of mobility. I truly understand now that a large portion of Gordon's quality of life depends on the comfort and functionality of his wheelchair. This experience was very unique, as it provided me the opportunity to develop an enthusiasm for advocating for people with disabilities through making their lives simpler through assistive technology."

About IDASL



IDASL was formed in the fall of 2000 and was designed to provide upper division undergraduate and graduate students with a better understanding of the systems that provide service to people with disabilities, and the barriers to providing service.

Class size is limited to around 15 students, and always includes at least one consumer with a disability and one family member of a consumer. Students may be eligible for a small stipend in addition to course credit.

The seminar-style class offers two components: didactic and service learning. Professionals or people with disabilities come and present information on a wide variety of issues related to disability.

One of the first lessons involves using 'people first' language, in which the person is emphasized, not their disability. Each class includes a 'media moment,' in which students share their observations of how people with disabilities are portrayed in the media. Students are encouraged to make changes to an article and contact the writer to promote awareness.

In addition to the classroom work, students complete service learning projects at the Assistive Technology lab, Project PEER (Postsecondary Education, Employment and Research), Up to 3 and the Developmental Skills Lab (DSL) on campus, and at OPTIONS for Independence and Common Ground in Logan.

Instructors are Richins, Alma Burgess, Jeanie Peck and Becky Keeley. The small class size and interdisciplinary nature make for good discussion, Burgess said. Richins and Keeley, who both use wheelchairs, bring a valuable perspective to the class, as do family members of people with disabilities.

Applications are now being accepted for the 2014-2015 IDASL cohort. Contact Burgess at 797-0253 or visit www.idasl.net for more information.