



## FEATURE ARTICLE FROM ALWAYS BEST CARE

# Oldest-living Quadriplegic Advocates for Disabled

Wally Dutcher's accomplishments would be impressive for any one: serving on or starting various organizations that advocated for the disabled, running a successful business, designing his own homes as well as accessible sailing docks and starting a swim program for young people.



But the fact that Dutcher, 78, is the oldest living quadriplegic, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, makes his achievements even more noteworthy.

When Dutcher was 19, he had a diving accident in a pool while enlisted with the Navy. Far from being discouraged about the spinal cord injury that radically changed his life, the young man saw his accident “as a challenge rather than a defeat.”

At that young age, “I didn’t know what was in store in the future.” He started an occupational therapy program with others. “You just learned to deal with it,” he says.

In his college years, he studied architecture, broadcasting and business, and was able to use all three skills, although probably not in the way he originally intended.

The St. Petersburg, Fla., resident's design accomplishments include a bowling stick to help disabled bowlers; a prototype accessible workstation for the city's libraries; accessible lecterns for the City Council Chamber; three of his own homes, using the principles of Universal Design, which focus on creating structures that will be adaptable to any need; and accessible docks for the Sailing Center in St. Petersburg, which are considered the finest small-venue accessible sailing venue in the world. “Of course, like most everything I’ve done, I didn’t know a thing about what was needed in the design [of the docks],” he says, and learned by observing the current platform that provided poor access for disabled who wanted to sail.

He used his business skills to manage several companies, including mutual funds and a cabinet manufacturer, leading it through its growth to become a 165-employee, \$6 million company in 2½ years.

With his broadcasting skills, he officiated at swim meets around the state for 13 years. His young daughter could swim all four strokes as a young girl, but St. Petersburg didn’t offer a year-round program for swimmers younger than 13-14 years old who weren’t involved in high school swim teams, so Dutcher organized other parents and went to the city with a proposal.

The result was a swim club that not only became the main resource for lifeguard staffing for the city's six pools but a breeding ground for new swimmers who wanted to move into a year-round program. In the process, his daughter became a world class swimmer and received a four-year college scholarship for her efforts and achievements.

Dutcher accomplished all this, including raising a daughter with his wife, while in a wheelchair. He is able to feed himself, use the phone (with hand controls), type on a computer (using an adapted pencil to push down on the keys) and drive a van since 1981, when wheelchair-accessible vans first came out. This independence allowed Dutcher to start working.

His advocacy work for the disabled included helping start the National Paraplegia Foundation (now the National Spinal Cord Injury Association); helping start and serving on the St. Petersburg's Committee to Advocate for Persons with Impairments; helping organize and manage the National Alliance of the Disabled, a virtual online national, cross-disability, grassroots organization; and organizing Caring & Sharing Center for Independent Living in St. Petersburg and serving on its Board of Directors.

Yet, he says, his proudest work in advocacy was pursuing a complaint through the Department of Justice for 11 years to get a 26-block stretch of a street in St. Petersburg more accessible for the disabled. "Every time I travel on it I get a smile."

His honors include nomination by New Mobility magazine, along with notables such as Stephen Hawking and John Hockenberry, for the "Person of the Year" award; a profile in *Roll Models: People Who Live Successful Lives After Spinal Cord Injury and How They Do It* by Richard Hollicky; and the St. Petersburg College Alumni Association 2006 "Alumni of the Year."

When Dutcher first attempted to educate the world about the difficulties of being in a wheelchair, it was before the Americans with Disabilities Act mandated accessibility. If you wanted to get into a restaurant or store that didn't have accessible ramps or other modifications, you had to confront the owner, which Dutcher wasn't afraid to do.

"I want to do business with you but can't get in there," he would tell the owner. Sometimes the business owner would figure something out, such as taking him through the kitchen or using the freight elevator. He remembers the staff of an Atlanta restaurant leading him through an emergency exit corridor, which was more of a tunnel used for storage space and was filled with spider webs.

He told business owners that "If you don't want to [provide handicapped access], I won't patronage your facilities, and I'll tell the rest of my friends about it."

Modest about his achievements, Dutcher says the biggest hurdle for him in being disabled is having to ask for help to do something he was able to do before his injury, like putting a charger on a car or opening up the battery compartment.

When Dutcher is asked what made him survive and thrive to become the longest-living quadriplegic, he first says that he's only labeled such because his daughter submitted the documents, even though he knows of at least one other quadriplegic who exceeds him by 1½ years.

And, he says, he had an advantage that other disabled people didn't: his Navy service reaped veterans' compensation, which provided the wheelchair and an accessible van with air conditioning (important for those with spinal cord injuries who can't afford to lose body heat). He can afford to live in a house he designed and has enough money to pay for caregiving, while other disabled people with less means end up in institutions. He points out that the government will pay for institutional care but not for caregiving or transportation that would keep them independent.

Yet, Dutcher is proud of the fact that he was able to pay back the generosity of taxpayers. He ran a company with 162 employees. "I paid taxes, people I employed paid taxes, bought things from stores that paid taxes. And the circle gets larger, like throwing a rock into water."

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