

100 MILE HOUSE FREE PRESS

Disabled man reaches for the sky

By Arlene Jongbloets - 100 Mile House Free Press

Published: July 15, 2008 7:00 PM

“You don’t need legs when you’ve got wings.”

Those are the words of Phil Gabel, a Mile 108 quadriplegic man who experiences most of life from the confines of a wheelchair.

Last summer, he discovered a new freedom in flying a glider in the skies above the Fraser Valley.

It allowed him to soar over the patchwork farms and fields, the magnificent Cascade Mountains near Hope and to personal heights he’d almost forgotten could be reached.

He rode in the front of the plane, with a pilot behind him at the main controls. The glider was towed to about 5,000 ft. by a Cessna aircraft, let go and left to ride the thermal updrafts for an exhilarating hour. Now and again, Gabel was given the controls.

“Gliding is really a neat experience. So quiet and serene,” said Gabel.

Gabel said he’s grateful to the program developed by quadriplegic Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan, called Easy Gliders, which makes it possible for physically disabled people to take to the sky.

Easy Gliders is only one of several programs offered by Sullivan’s BC Mobility Opportunities Society (BCMOS). The disability foundation also offers hiking experiences on a single-wheeled wilderness access vehicle; this requires four able-bodied people to push, pull and guide the vehicle, but the gurney-like device allows a disabled person to enjoy wilderness trails and the great outdoors that aren’t otherwise accessible to them.

Another of the BCMOS programs that caught the interest of Gabel is sailing. He gave it a try last summer on one of four sailboats that have been specially outfitted to accommodate quadriplegics.

Gabel said even people with severe disabilities can sail the craft.

Adapting has been the name of the game for Gabel since a July 2004 car crash put him in a wheelchair.



Phil Gabel sits in the glider he helped pilot over the fields of the Fraser Valley. The flying program is offered by Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan's disability foundation.

"I didn't have any illusions about getting better after I woke up from the coma. I've just had to focus on what I can do rather than what I can't," he said.

The first task was learning to just breath on his own. After six months at Vancouver General Hospital, working on the basics, Gabel moved on to GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre where he spent eight months learning how to better normalize his life and re-enter the community.

Now he's on a new adventure, preparing to welcome a personal assistance dog (PADS) into his life. Gabel said his golden lab PADS dog, Corr, will be the first of its kind in the South Cariboo area that he's aware of.

He's been on the PADS waiting list for three years, but his wait will come to an end in the coming weeks after he and Corr get to know each other and complete a short training program in Burnaby.

"I'll learn the commands and Corr will get to know me and my needs," said Gabel.

Corr will be the arms and hands for Gabel, who has very limited use of his own. Currently a personal aid spends the daytime hours with him, providing whatever help he needs while his wife, Dana, is at work.

Gabel said his dog has been trained to retrieve requested objects, open doors and even open a fridge door and pick out specially fitted containers that he can grasp with his teeth.

PADS dogs are typically raised by a family who get them as puppies and teach them to socialize over the course of one year. A year of specialized training follows before the dog is paired up with someone in need.

Gabel said it costs roughly \$20,000 to raise and train a PADS dog but there is no cost to the recipient.

"I'm really excited about getting the dog. People will be seeing Corr and me around town really soon," he said.

Gabel is looking forward to the increased mobility he'll soon have but said that 100 Mile House is already quite an accessible community.

"Before I came home, I thought getting around would be much harder, but to my surprise, the town is very good," he said. "And to counter other stories, being disabled doesn't mean you're housebound or can't do anything. The opportunities are out there. You just have to make them happen."

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