

Discarded in America, a Life Changer in Mongolia

By JAMES BROOKE

ULAN BATOR, Mongolia

FIVE-YEAR-OLD Gersenz Orkhon's brow furrowed. His plastic tools were arrayed on his wheelchair work tray, and with a screwdriver he pried the tracks off his yellow toy bulldozer. Ignoring visitors to his apartment, he grumbled to his grandfather, "This screwdriver's not very good."

A little more than a year ago, Gersenz, who has a mild case of cerebral palsy, wailed when strangers approached, his vocabulary was limited to a few grunts and his only means of getting around was an orange crate fitted with rough wooden wheels.

The change was wrought by a Zippie 2, a wheelchair designed for children, complete with adjustable headrest, royal blue harness, fuchsia frame and backrest embroidered in pink with the name of a faraway American girl, Lanie, on it.

The bridge between a used pediatric wheelchair destined for a California landfill and a cozy third-floor apartment in a Mongolian housing block is Wheels for Humanity, an American charity operating on a shoestring. It was founded a decade ago by David Richard, a former golf equipment salesman from Wisconsin now living in Studio City, Calif., who was moved to action by a glaring humanitarian disconnect.

On one end, the mountain of discarded wheelchairs in the United States was growing ever higher. An aging population required more chairs, but a more restrictive

legal environment banned resales of used ones. On the other end, disabled people in developing countries were still stagnating in back rooms or dragging themselves through streets in scenes evoking medieval Europe.

"We would be shocked to see an elderly woman, disabled by polio, crawl across a city street, or to see a 10-year-old boy with cerebral palsy carried everywhere on his mother's back," Mr. Richard wrote recently in one of his simple one-page appeals. (The Web site is wheelsforhumanity.org.) From a modest start in 1995, salvaging 150 wheelchairs from friends' garages and shipping them to Guatemala, he gradually built his charity to the point where he expects to send about 5,000 refurbished chairs to about 20 countries this year.

"We move slowly because it costs money to move this stuff around," Mr. Richard said by telephone from North Hollywood, Calif., where Wheels has its headquarters and a 10,800-square-foot warehouse for rebuilding the wheelchairs. "This year, with a total budget of \$500,000, we will move 5,000 chairs."

While this is a fraction of the estimated 300,000 wheelchairs that are discarded annually in the United States, Mr. Richard stresses two facets of his home-grown operation: rehabilitation of the chairs and fitting to the "client." In short, he said, this is not a feel-good operation where an American charity drops off a container of used wheelchairs at a hospital in a developing country, and takes some pictures for another round of fund-raising.

First, the wheelchairs are totally cleaned and rebuilt.



Gersenz Orkhon being fitted for a Zippie 2, a used wheelchair from Wheels for Humanity, by Mary-Helen Brown, a volunteer.

"I strip it all down to the bare frame, take wheels off, the bearings out, the seat out, then you pressure-wash the frame to get all the dirt and grime out," said Johnny DiGiorgio, a 63-year-old retired general contractor and Wheels volunteer, who devotes a half day to work on each chair. "Then I reinstall the bearings, repack them in grease, put the wheels on, adjust the

brakes, the wheel stops, fit the seat to the frame."

Mr. DiGiorgio's initials were on the tag on the Zippie 2 for Gersenz. Asked about the fuchsia frame and royal blue harness, he said: "You scavenge what you need."

In the age of the Internet, groups with disabilities in recipient nations can now order chairs to meet the specific size and needs of a real person, like Gersenz.

On Sept. 17, 2003, the day that Gersenz and his mother, R. Oyunkhishig, arrived at a downtown theater here to pick up his chair, an American occupational therapist and a Mongolian interpreter were waiting.

Amid the hubbub of the disabled young people nervously trying out their first

wheelchairs, Mary-Helen Brown, an occupational therapist from Stockton, Calif., carefully walked Mrs. Oyunkhishig through the steps of folding the chair for travel and adjusting the headrest, footrest and lateral rest for her son's future growth.

To help Gersenz develop the bone

density to allow him to walk one day with crutches, Ms. Brown stressed the importance of keeping him upright in the chair and encouraging him to practice with a pediatric walker that Wheels donated with the chair.

"It's very difficult to find a chair like this in Mongolia," Mrs. Oyunkhishig said of the Zippie 2, which would sell in the United States for \$2,000 to \$3,000. The price would be even higher in this landlocked country, out of reach even for a middle-class Mongolian like Mrs. Oyunkhishig, a sales manager for a private energy company. "I really want to thank the American family for donating this chair for my son," she said.

For Mr. Richard, back in California, the hard part is not getting enough donated chairs.

"There are tens of thousands of wheelchairs sitting idle in garages, basements, sheds or closets," he said. "At least 50 percent of what we get are donated by family members." Others are given by manufacturers or vendors on the condition that they not be given away within the United States.

With the no-resale laws, vendors often get stuck with convalescent chairs ordered for people who die before delivery of their

chairs. Manufacturers often take back fully working chairs from vendors that buyers have rejected because of metal scratches or chipped paint.

"We get these brand-new wheelchairs worth \$5,000, \$6,000 straight from the manufacturers," Mr. Richard said. "They cannot resell these wheelchairs because they are a medical device."

Wheels for Humanity runs largely on the power of volunteers, who put in 11,000 hours last year. Ms. Brown, the occupational therapist, paid her own air fare and hotel bill here, visiting on her vacation time. The payoff, she said, was seeing the effect her work has on people.

For Mr. DiGiorgio in the North Hollywood warehouse, it is the photos that move him. "I have seen some of those photos of when they bring them in on wheelbarrows," he said. "It is just amazing."

For Gersenz, the impact of nine months with the wheelchair and walker was clear in June on a follow-up visit.

"He has started to walk more independently," Mrs. Oyunkhishig said, as her son labored in the walker to reach her outstretched arms.

No longer suffering from sharp mood changes, Gersenz does not need to take sedatives at school or sleeping pills at night.

"His mentality has improved, and his language too," she said. "He used to have problems understanding cartoons, now he asks for Tom and Jerry, for Popeye."

Monday, November 15, 2004

Gersenz and his mother, R. Oyunkhishig, at their home in Mongolia.

