

Manpower v. Horsepower | CPD Blog

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Why I Choose A Manual Wheelchair Over A Power Wheelchair

I have been asked many times why I choose NOT to use a power wheelchair—they are faster, easy to maneuver, and can go in more places than a manual chair. Don't get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with a power wheelchair—and for some, they are absolutely essential. For many it is the only way they can be “free” to go to work, participate in cultural events, and simply enjoy life to its fullest. For those who do not have the physical ability to handle a manual wheelchair, the power wheelchair is there to do all the work for them—therein lies the reason why I choose NOT to use them. I have always been told that nothing worthwhile is ever easy—you have to work for it.

Up until about 5 or 6 years ago, I chose to use crutches and braces to get around (and had been using them for about 50 years). I had been involved in a farming accident that left me a paraplegic—paralyzed from the waist down. When I was younger, I could go everywhere with my crutches and braces that a wheelchair could not—I could go upstairs, downstairs, tubing on the snow in our pastures, climbing on top of our barn loft, etc. I had the strength and energy to do pretty much anything I wanted. But as I got older, and yes—heavier—my strength decreased. I would have to stop several times as I went from my car to my office just to rest and catch my breath. I would develop pressure sores on my legs from my braces and they were excruciatingly painful and uncomfortable. Frankly, they stunk. I mean literally, they really stunk. They would get infected and the smell was unpleasant to say the least—both for me and I am sure for those who had the misfortune of being around me.

One day my braces broke and I was forced to use my wheelchair to go to work while I sent my braces off to be repaired—something that was going to take two to three weeks. I had been using a wheelchair at home and to go shopping, but I always had my sister there to lift it in and out of my car. But when I had to start using it for work and had to get it in and out of the car by myself, I learned something about me and about my wheelchair. I learned that where there is a will, there is a way and that my wheelchair was actually very lightweight and portable. I would slide from my wheelchair into the driver's seat, pop off the big rear wheels and toss them in the back seat, and then I would lift the chair over my lap and set it in the passenger seat of my car. My small, red, sporty car (try doing that with a power chair)!

At first, I made sure I got to work early—before anybody else came so they would not see me getting my wheelchair out of my car. It embarrassed me. I would then make sure I left either before anybody else or after—for the same reason. The first few days at work were the most awkward—everybody kept asking me “Is your condition getting worse? Why are you using a wheelchair?” Then they would see me zipping all over the building. Instead of doing meetings via Skype, I actually attended the meetings in person! When I got the call that said my braces were fixed and I could go pick them up, I hesitated. I did go pick them up, but I never put them on. Funny thing, during those couple weeks that I was in my wheelchair, the pressure sores on my legs had healed—I had not felt so good and pain-free in years! Then a bomb shell was dropped. I was diagnosed with Type II diabetes. My doctor told me I needed to change my diet, lose weight, get more exercise...you know the routine.

I started taking a break 2-3 times a day and just wheeling around the outside of the building. I could do two laps before I was just too worn out to go any further without resting my arms. One day a colleague of mine asked if I wanted to go across campus with her—literally all the way across campus—from the far north side to the far south side. She had a meeting that she had to go to, so that meant I would go over with her, but I would have to come back by myself. I hesitated and told her I did not know if I had the strength to go that far—it was probably a little over a mile roundtrip. She nagged—or should I say—encouraged—me until I finally gave in. I told her I could always stop on the way and rest if I needed to. That day began the change I saw in my life because I had a MANUAL wheelchair. I made it all the way across campus and rested for several minutes and then made my way back to my office—all by myself! It took me about 30

minutes roundtrip (not counting the 10-15 minutes I had to pause and rest). I determined there and then that I was going to start venturing out further from the office. By the time I went to my next doctor's appointment (6 months later), my A1C had gone down from 8 to 7, my blood pressure was down from 140/90 to 125/85, both my LDL and HDL cholesterol were now within normal ranges, my lungs were clearer, my heartbeat stronger, my oxygen levels were at 100%, and I started losing weight! Not only was I getting out and around more, but I was getting a state-of-the-art cardiovascular workout! My doctor was amazed and asked me what I was doing to make this change. I described my daily routine with my wheelchair. He was impressed and told me that many of his patients without a wheelchair were not getting that amount of exercise and making that type of progress with their health.

Over the next several months and years, I have continued this routine. I bought a Fit Bit and began tracking my steps. I had originally set my daily goal on the tracker app to 5,000 steps. It took me almost a year to build up the strength and endurance to get that consistently (meaning at least 5 days a week). Once I was consistent with that amount, I increased my goal to 10,000 steps per day. It took me another year to reach that goal and be consistent with it (again, at least 5 days a week). I am currently getting between 14,000 and 17,000 steps a day. The mile that once took me 30+ minutes with rest periods, now only takes just under 15 minutes without stopping. My A1C continues to go down, my blood pressure has been consistently around 120/72, both my LDL and HDL have maintained healthy levels—everything was perfect. To date, I have lost over 50 pounds and have gone down several dress sizes! My upper-body strength is amazing! My mental health has never been better! When I get feeling overwhelmed and stressed at work, I take a break and go for a st“roll” around campus or the nearby cemetery...pumping as fast and hard as I can and working off that stress—just like many individuals without a disability would do via aerobics, punching bag, kick boxing, or some other strenuous physical activity. If I had been using a power wheelchair, simply rotating a small joystick around, I KNOW I would NOT be able to say the same...the most I would have gotten from that is probably carpal tunnel!

I do not know if there has been research done that documents the health status of individuals who use a power wheelchair vs. those who use a manual wheelchair...I think there should be—maybe doctors would not be so quick to prescribe a power chair. But in my case, the health benefits I receive because of my use of a manual wheelchair are literally life changing!