

# Wheelchairs give gift of mobility to Afghans

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Seventy-year-old Khan Gul wrapped a thick piece of rubber cut from an old inner tube around his pant legs before leaving the house so he could drag his limp, useless legs over rocky ground without filleting his skin. He has not walked since both ankles were broken in a bombing near his home in Afghanistan.

Last October, a short-term team from Southeast gave Gul a wheelchair that helps him get around his village. That refurbished chair became the 70-year-old's ticket to mobility, making it easier to work as a carpenter to support his family.

Part of the team's goals in Afghanistan was to fit 50 disabled Afghans with wheelchairs that Southeast member Jenny Smith had collected when working with the

Mobility Project, a non-profit agency that works with disabled individuals throughout the world. She understands how much independence means.

Smith was an accomplished gymnast and a cheerleader at Christian Academy of Louisville when she slipped while practicing a back flip on wet grass. She's been in a wheelchair ever since the spinal cord injury she sustained when she was 16. It hasn't slowed her pace much. Smith earned bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Louisville. She speaks Spanish and some Persian, plays rugby and rows.

"A wheelchair accompanies me on my adventures, but it does not determine my future," Smith said.

In Afghanistan, some 17 percent of the general population deals with disability due to war, suicide bombers, land mines and birth defects. According to USAID, (United States Agency for International Development), that adds up to more than a million Afghans. Some stepped on land mines. Others were caught in gunfire or bombings. Still others were born with muscular dystrophy or cerebral palsy.

By comparison, in the United States, less than 1 percent of the population deals with a disability that confines them to a wheelchair.

Without the chairs, many Afghans are homebound, must crawl on their hands from place to place, find someone to carry them, or they hitch rides in wheelbarrows or carts.

A few lucky ones collect a pension of 6,000 afghanis (about \$120) a year from the government, but it is not enough to live on, and they must rely on relatives or friends to help them. Having a wheelchair changes their world.

Ask 33-year-old Walibullah, who has bullet wounds in his leg and arm from an attack 12 years ago. He heard about the wheelchairs and went to the distribution, even though he had not applied to receive one. He was distraught when the team told him to come back later in case there were any chairs left after the planned distribution. One of the leftover chairs fit him and even had elevating leg rests that allowed him to rest his non-bending leg while he turned the wheels with his arms.

Chairs must fit an individual's body. Sometimes that wasn't easy, since none of the crucial measurements had been sent ahead of the distribution. It seemed no coincidence that random chairs fit those who needed them.

Five-year-old Neelofar Mahmood has cerebral palsy and autism. A family member carried her to the wheelchair distribution where the team gave her a chair that someone "accidentally" packed in the truck. It fit her perfectly.

In addition to three wheelchair distributions in Berek Aub, a refugee resettlement camp in the Afghan desert, Shaka Dara and Istalif, the team also worked on construction projects and food distribution.



One of the concerns before leaving for Afghanistan was security.

Southeast members Bruce Williford and Larry Freibert had never been on a mission trip out of the U.S. when they signed up for the trip. On their first night in the distant country, gunmen in Kabul shot Gayle Williams, a 34-year-old aid worker with dual British and South African citizenship. She worked for SERVE Afghanistan, an interdenominational Christian charity that helps the disabled. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the death, stating on a website that they killed the "foreign woman" for preaching Christianity in the country, adding that they had been looking for her for some time. Since then, security has been on high alert for foreign aid workers in the country.

However, no one on the Southeast team felt they were in danger.

"I have a spot on my arm that rashes up with stress," Freibert said. "It was fine the whole time. I never felt insecure. I had peace because I felt we were protected."

Smith said preparing for the trip fundamentally changed how she viewed the world and God's will for her life.

"We prayed out loud for each one getting a chair," she said. "Sometimes that looked like, 'Can I pray for you to our God?' and the people were open to that."

People often ask volunteers why they choose to go to Afghanistan.

Smith explained it in simple terms.

"We're commanded to go to the ends of the Earth. Just because it's dangerous doesn't mean you get to stay away. For those of us who have been to Afghanistan, security is not such a big deal," she said.

Chris Hadley and his wife, Melinda, are so at home in the country that they are considering volunteering full-time.

There were moments each team member will never forget:

» For Bobby Morris, it was the day two boys received wheelchairs. Both were injured when their house was bombed and it collapsed on them. The only way they could get around was by crawling on their hands and dragging their feet.

"We were able to give both of them chairs," Morris said. "One of them clapped and clapped after he got his chair."

» For Jenny Smith, it was being able to follow through on distributing the wheelchairs.

» For Larry Freibert, it was the peace that seemed to pervade each experience.

» For Bruce Williford, it was the almost tangible joy he saw on the faces of those who received chairs.

» For Chris Hadley, it was the day when an older man in the village pulled on his beard—a sign of respect for the team.

Williford said the team spent a lot of time on their hands and knees, literally washing feet at clinics.

"That's the perfect place to be and the perfect thing to do," he said.