

Power wheelchair provides more independence

By Pam Blevins
Special to the Post

I have cerebral palsy, also known as CP, because a portion of my brain (affecting my motor skills, balance, and speech) was damaged during my birth. As a result of my CP, I have relied on people to push me around in a manual wheelchair for most of my life because I've never been able to walk without assistance except for when I used a walker in elementary school. Naturally, I have always wished that I could ambulate independently.

I have never forgotten the first time that I saw an electric wheelchair as a young child in the 1970s when I attended the Day Care Center for the Handicapped (currently known as the Ashe Developmental Day School). It fascinated me to watch my much older friend, Martha, ride hers at the day care center. I was even more excited when she would take me for rides in her chair while I sat on her lap. I was thrilled when Martha allowed me to "drive" her chair while we were in the center's parking lot on a warm summer day. I remember how proud I was of myself for being able to control the electric wheelchair so well regardless of my spastic, uncontrollable movements. I decided to have more fun by trying to scare Martha, so I guided the chair straight towards the day care building. I stopped the chair before we crashed into the outside wall as I had planned; however, Martha didn't realize that it was only a prank even though I was laughing. The joke backfired because she didn't permit me to control her electric wheelchair again.

I was in my early teens when I finally had another chance to use an electric wheelchair while I spent a week at a children's hospital in Durham where they tested me to see how well I could use various special devices. They allowed me to ride around the hospital in



Courtesy photo
Pam Blevins of Lansing got to meet UNC standout Isiah Hicks in Chapel Hill.

another patient's electric wheelchair for a day. I loved zooming up and down the hallway as fast as the chair would go. Perhaps the patient was scared I would have a major accident because she didn't seem pleased as she watched me speed-riding around in her chair. I was thrilled when they recommended an electric wheelchair for me even though I almost collided with a boy in his wheelchair, and I bumped into a nurse. Soon after I received the chair, my dreams of using it at my school were dashed mainly because charging the battery was a very precise process making it too difficult to charge during school hours. Unfortunately, I could use the electric wheelchair only inside our home and around our yard because we didn't have a van to transport the chair.

As an adult, I concluded that I would probably never have a power wheelchair which I could use in public places. However, someone mentioned to my father a few years ago that I could obtain a power chair for free since I am a Medicare and Medicaid recipient. After discussing with my parents the practicability of me having a power wheelchair, we decided to begin the process of getting one since it has become harder for me to walk even with assistance as I have aged. My parents also discussed purchasing an accessible van with a ramp or a lift if I could control the power chair well.

It was an exciting day when the friendly and

informative Freedom Mobility Center representative delivered the power wheelchair to my home a few years ago. After she gave me a quick tutorial about how to properly use the power chair, I anxiously rode around in my chair for the first time. I think I surprised everyone, even myself, by how well I controlled the chair on my first attempt. I had lots of fun practicing driving my new Cadillac (as I call my power chair) inside our house, and it was even more exciting when I ventured outside. I did fine riding down our ramp; however, our driveway intimidated me since it has a slight incline at the top. Going down our driveway in my power chair wasn't too frightening, but I became terrified at the thoughts of driving back up the incline because I was scared that I would lose control and topple over the highest edge of the drive. Mom, who was walking along with me as I practiced, thought that she would have to take control of my chair since it was several minutes before I found enough courage to attempt to go back up the driveway myself. Once I overcame my fear, I made it safely up our driveway.

A few months later, my parents purchased an accessible van with a wheelchair lift to allow me to travel in my power chair. It was a thrilling adventure for me the first time that I went to a store in my power wheelchair because I could finally go wherever I wanted to without relying on anyone else to roll

me around. It gave me a sense of independence that I had never experienced before by allowing me to leave my parents to look at items which interested me while they were shopping in other departments. There have been a few occasions that my parents had a difficult time finding me in a store because I wasn't where they thought I would be.

Traveling to Chapel Hill to visit the North Carolina Tar Heels basketball museum and the Dean E. Smith Center (affectionately called the "Dean Dome") in October 2013 was one of the most exciting trips I've had in my power wheelchair. Thanks to my father's influence, I have been an avid Tar Heel basketball fan since the mid 1980s. Since neither of my parents like to drive on long trips, I appreciated our friends, Jim and Gloria Sturgill, for going with us because Jim drove our van to Chapel Hill. I think that they enjoyed being with us especially since Jim is also an enthusiastic Carolina fan.

Being in the Carolina basketball museum was like a dream come true for me. It was even more exciting to be able to transport myself in my power wheelchair to view the players and coaches' exhibits and the championship trophies that I wanted to see without having to point in the direction where I wanted to go. After we finished looking at everything in the museum, I couldn't wait to go inside the "Dean Dome" to see the

home court of the men's basketball team. We were on an upper level of the building, but we could look down and see the court. As my parents, Jim, and Gloria walked down the steps to a lower level, I rode around in the lobby area in my power chair where I could see different views of the basketball court, and I also enjoyed looking at wall pictures of the Carolina teams through the years. Since I was an adult in my 40s, I chuckled to myself when Dad would call up to me from the lower level to warn me not to get too close to the stairs.

I searched for a ramp or an elevator because I had a secret plan to try to get on the basketball court. I wanted to have my picture taken in the center of the court where the blue North Carolina logo map was. Unfortunately, that plan didn't become a reality. As we started to exit the "Dean Dome," a janitor told us that head basketball coach, Roy Williams, just walked by outside the building. I raced outside in my power chair in the hopes of meeting Coach Williams; however, he was already out of sight. I kept going in the direction as he was seen walking which led me around the "Dean Dome" to the coaches' office. Dad, Jim, and I went into the coaches' office lobby, but we still didn't see Coach Williams.

We knew it was time to leave after looking at the Carolina trophies and memorabilia in the office. As we reached the exit

door, a very tall young man wearing a Carolina jogging suit was entering the building. He kindly held the door open for me until we were outside. I knew that he had to be a basketball player even though I was surprised that I didn't recognize him since I knew all the Carolina players who regularly played. Although I was excited about the opportunity of meeting a Tar Heel player, I told myself to remain calm as I went out the door because I didn't want to bump into him with my power chair. Dad excitedly asked the young man if he played for the Tar Heels, and he replied that he did. I was a little embarrassed when Dad then asked me if I knew him because I had to say no. We learned that he was Isiah Hicks, and he hadn't played in any Carolina ballgames because he was an incoming freshman that year. I appreciated how nice he was and that he allowed Dad to take a picture of the two of us. We certainly know who Hicks is now after we've watched him become a fine Carolina basketball player during the past three seasons.

My power wheelchair has given me more self-confidence and a feeling of independence that I've never had. I only wish that I had obtained my chair several years ago when my parents and I were younger while we felt like traveling more. However, I look forward to having more exciting adventures in my power chair.

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