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Disabled get customized care and chairs at SEATS: Alternative to rehabilitation centre. Chance meeting sparked Shackles's interest in helping handicapped sit comfortably

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Illustrations: Color Photo: LYNN BALL, OTTAWA CITIZEN / Ed Shackles, who designs and builds custom seating for people with handicaps, is shown with Jacob Melhuish (left) and his brother, Zachary.

A chance meeting more than 15 years ago determined the professional direction that Ed Shackles has taken ever since.

"I met a man who was an amputee with a full prosthesis," recalls Shackles, the founding owner of SEATS (Seating Excellence and Adaptive Therapeutic Systems).

"That got me interested in how I could help other people with disabilities.

"So I went to school to study prosthetics and orthotics."

After graduating from George Brown College in Toronto, he started to work at the Ottawa Rehabilitation Centre.

For the next eight years he focused on keeping people sitting comfortably in customized wheelchairs and other forms of mobility and positioning equipment.

The work was satisfying, he said, as long as helping clients was front and centre. However, budget and staff cuts in the custom-seating program at the rehabilitation centre "changed the mood of the place."

Therefore, Shackles, who had already purchased a number of pieces of manufacturing equipment with the long-term objective of setting up his own company, decided that the time was right to strike out on his own.

Then 37, he invested his savings, supplemented by a mortgage, in a \$60,000 property.

"It had a huge body shop and I could also live there," he said. "That way I could begin my business with the least amount of investment."

By continually reinvesting any profits in the company, he has gradually accumulated close to \$100,000 worth of equipment and has built a new \$150,000 workshop and 2,000-square-foot warehouse on the property.

"Basically, I reinvest everything I make from the business and do as much as I can myself," he said.

Apart from construction, he designs, molds and builds the equipment, designs fabric patterns for

children's wheelchairs and sews the seat covers.

"I was designing and building gym equipment when I was 16. I taught myself to weld. I do everything that has to be done and I'm working on the business day in and day out."

His dedication to his company, now with a staff of four, has involved some sacrifices in day-to-day living, admits Shackles.

"I live in a half-finished house without plumbing and carry water in from the shop."

That is likely to continue for a while, he said, as he has just "used all the equity and leveraged everything out of the property" to purchase a MEDiChair franchise in Ottawa.

"MEDiChair has good buying power," pointed out Shackles. "That's essential to be competitive when you're selling medical equipment."

Operating under the MEDiChair banner will also be useful in terms of customer perception, he added.

"When kids go to college, their parents want to know that their chairs can be serviced while they're away, for instance."

This is one of several reasons that Shackles gives for the "marriage" of SEATS and MEDiChair.

Operating a retail outlet allows him more quality control, he said.

"We end up doing an awful lot of adjustments to fabricated products."

He cites one example of "a \$5,000 wheelchair that came in with the handles falling off."

While up to 80 per cent of his 250 clients are children and young adults, most of the remainder are seniors.

"The provincial government's assistive-devices program is now more accessible to seniors. . . . The government is also setting up satellite programs, with services covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan, to give more people service.

"I aim to provide an option to the rehabilitation

centre, where waiting time for an appointment can be up to a year.

"There's definitely a need and a business opportunity here," he said. Shackles added that he anticipates the store will be in a profitable position within six months.

The 2,500-square-foot retail outlet, which he has leased for five years, has been customized to Shackles's specifications.

It includes a consulting room and an oversized washroom equipped for the handicapped, and will offer on-site assessments and rehabilitation services.

In addition to servicing and selling wheelchairs ranging from \$800 to \$30,000, walkers, scooters, lifts and beds, the store will offer such aids as orthotics and catheters.

"Clients can arrange to see therapists here and we can do the fittings right here," he said.

"I want this to be one-stop shopping convenience for clients."

The MEDChair/SEATS store is at 194 Robertson Rd., Unit 27A, Bells Corners. The telephone numbers are (613) 721-5866 and 721-2733 and the fax number is 721-8856.

The SEATS workshop is at 6765 Rideau Valley Drive South, Suite 241, Kars. The telephone numbers are (613) 489-1397 or (877) 537-3287 and the fax number is (613) 489-1424. The Web site is www.seats.ca