

Free Wheelchair Mission

“No Human Being Should Have to Crawl through Life”

By Anita K. Palmer

In July Don Schoendorfer greeted a visitor to his Free Wheelchair Mission in Irvine, California, with his leg in a cast and his torso in a brace.

Schoendorfer is co-founder of FWM, a Christian charity that provides inexpensive wheelchairs to the poorest of the poor in developing countries. He had just been released from the hospital after wiping out during a recreational bike ride, breaking his right fibula and fracturing a vertebrae in his back. Ironically, he crashed just two weeks after successfully completing a six-week, 3,500-mile, cross-country ride to raise funds for and awareness of Free Wheelchair Mission.

Thus Schoendorfer has been benefiting personally from his odd-looking wheelchair invention—with its mountain-bike tires and a plastic patio-chair seat—“quite proudly, too,” he wrote in his blog. “Everything became so much harder for me and my family, even with our wheelchair. Most everything is already impossible for those who do not have a wheelchair. If all goes well for me, I will be back to normal in two months. . . . Their challenges will only worsen if they don’t get a wheelchair. It is such a sharp contrast and ever clearer to me now since my accident. This experience sharpens my perspective of the importance of our mission,” wrote Schoendorfer.

Free Wheelchair Mission, a 501(c)3 public charity based in Irvine, California, has distributed approximately 240,000

wheelchairs since Schoendorfer co-founded the independent \$3.7 million Christian charity in 2001. Its goal is give out 20 million wheelchairs to the estimated 100 million disabled poor in the world, only a fraction of whom have access to mobility.

Even without his recent calamity, Schoendorfer, a modest mechanical engineer who left a career in biomedical devices, kept thoroughly grounded when it comes to his organization’s mission. He uses one of his inventions for his desk chair. Other staff do as well. In fact, the hybrid wheelchairs provide the only seating around the organization’s conference table. This writer can testify that they’re pretty comfortable and easy to maneuver.

How It Started

How did Schoendorfer get from inventing high-tech medical devices for multimillion-dollar companies to running a faith-based mission that manufactures \$45 wheelchairs?

With his speech hindered by the brace encasing his chest and back, Schoendorfer slowly recounted how the idea for Free Wheelchair Mission started. The story begins three decades ago in Morocco, where a much younger Schoendorfer and his wife, Laurie, were vacationing.

“There were a lot of things that I won’t forget about that trip, but mainly it was one of the first opportunities I had to be in a really poor country where there were a lot of beggars. . . . Narrow dirt roads, lined with beggars,” said Schoendorfer, a shy, straightforward wiry man with a bushy gray mustache. That’s where they saw the woman who, 30 years later, would change their lives.

“Between the legs of the beggars lining the road was this woman trying to get across the street. Literally dragging herself with one arm. Her clothes were torn and she was bleeding and filthy and she just wants to get across the road,” Schoendorfer said emphatically.

“No one was paying attention to her at all, just trying not to step on her—that was the kindest courtesy people would give. We didn’t know what to do. All we could do was turn around and look the other way. . . .” He shook his head and stared out

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freelance editor and
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the window, as if the experience was still fresh.

The Schoendorfers may have looked the other way then, but the vision of the Moroccan paraplegic clawing her way through life—certainly a common sight in many developing countries—never left them. Don Schoendorfer earned a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering from MIT, finding success in the biomedical industry. The couple raised three daughters in Southern California. They went to church. Yet something nagged at Schoendorfer.

“I got very good at being the guy in the back room, the inventor,” he said, during a recent tour of the Irvine offices. “So I’d work for one company and we would become successful at the expense of another company, but after 25 years was anyone going to care about what I’d invented? I mean, you might get out of the hospital three seconds earlier, but big deal...”

His growing urge to “do good” wasn’t at first motivated by his Christian worldview. It was merely a sense of paying back, of being thankful for all the breaks he had gotten over his career. However, slowly, Schoendorfer says, he began to believe that the way things fell into place wasn’t a coincidence.

“I was brought up as a Christian, but it was mostly as respect for my parents as much as anything. I always gave God credit for creating the universe but I never figured he was in my day to day life. ... [Eventually] I realized where the voice was coming from. It wasn’t really a voice but, I mean, how do you ever come from biomedical engineering to designing a wheelchair?” he asked rhetorically.

“Well, it wasn’t me,” said Schoendorfer, looking as if he is still a bit in awe even seven years later. “I was being led by a series of things that hap-

pened in my experience. The people who came alongside to help were doing it because of their Christian beliefs. I finally became convinced that all of this was God.”

Crazy Inventor

The “inventor in the back room” began to experiment. For months during 1998 and 1999 he tinkered in the early hours in his garage before leaving for work. “My neighbors probably thought I was crazy,” he said. His wife, though, was encouraging. He wanted to create something durable and cheap, something that could be pushed along dirt roads, up rocky paths, through muddy trails—anywhere the poorest of the poor lived.

At the Irvine headquarters Schoendorfer led his visitor up metal stairs to a storage loft at the back of the two-story building. Amidst a scattering of boxes sat a slightly dusty copy of the first wheelchair he invented, along with three subsequent chairs. All are very simple, even if each version was improved through trial and error.

In those early morning sessions, Schoendorfer hit upon the idea of using the ubiquitous molded plastic patio chair, the kind

you can buy at Home Depot. In fact, that’s where he got his first one. It was waterproof and washable, sturdy and relatively comfortable.

What about wheels? Again, Schoendorfer went the simple route: Toys ‘R Us inflatable bike tires. At first he used narrow tires. Then he settled on tires made for mountain bikes. “The mountain bike tires allow our chair to transverse rocky, uneven, and even muddy terrain that would be impossible for a regular wheelchair,” according to FWM’s Web site.

Schoendorfer said he ended up with 100 wheelchairs in his garage—their frames in flat boxes, and the seats stacked like extra church chairs. Now, what to do with them?

“When I first realized I needed help [to get these wheelchairs into the hands of the needy] I didn’t have



Mobility Brings Opportunity

the nerve to talk directly to my pastor. I sent an e-mail,” said Schoendorfer, a self-avowed introvert. “Darned if he didn’t sent back an e-mail saying he wanted to meet with me. I had never been to a church on a weekday before.”

The pastor was enthusiastic. He took a ride on the wheelchair in the parking lot. Two strangers were walking by, Schoendorfer said, and both commented, “Wouldn’t that be a wonderful thing for the disabled poor to have?”

Experiment in India

Schoendorfer learned of a medical mission trip to India being organized at his congregation, Mariners Church in Irvine. “I managed to pretty much bluff my way into the trip. I wasn’t a doctor, I wasn’t a nurse. I had all this baggage to take. I just persevered,” he laughed.

Nevertheless, Schoendorfer almost didn’t go. The organizers were skeptical, plus the extra baggage fees would cost three times the value of the wheelchairs.

“I had resistance everywhere along the way, because I didn’t have any answers yet,” he remembered. “Where are you going to get the money? I don’t know. Who’s going to make them? I don’t know. How’re you going to give them away? I don’t know. Who’s going to help you give them away? I don’t know. How are you going to fix them? I don’t know. But you say you want to give away a couple million wheelchairs? Yeah...”

Why did he keep going? Schoendorfer looked almost embarrassed at his answer. “Well, uh, God.”

At an overcrowded medical outreach clinic outside Chennai, India, Schoendorfer experienced for the first time the effect his invention would have. One of the first families who arrived to take advantage of the free medical care was a man and his wife, carrying their 11-year-old son who had cerebral palsy. The boy, Emmanuel, was agitated and moving wildly. Schoendorfer ran to get the one wheelchair he had been allowed to bring on this outing.

It was supposed to be a celebration, said Schoendorfer. But 7,000 people showed up, some of them crawling for miles. “It almost turned into a riot.”

“I put it in front of them and backed off. I didn’t know what would happen,” said Schoendorfer. “One of the criticisms I had heard in the United States was, “how are you going to train people to use the chair?” In the U.S. people go through training and therapy before they can use a wheelchair. Here, the man put Emmanuel in the wheelchair, and stood behind it, rocking it gently. The boy started to calm down, and he looked overjoyed.”

Schoendorfer smiled, remembering. “I was amazed. See, told you that it would work.”

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Founder and President:

Don Schoendorfer, Ph.D.

Established: 2001

Impact: 240,000 wheelchairs in 65 countries

Funding: Donations and grants

Launching Out in Faith

Michael Bayer was on that Indian mission trip and he gave away the second wheelchair. An orthopedic surgeon, Bayer remembers visiting a girl lying on a dirt floor. He diagnosed her with muscular dystrophy, and knew she would never walk. After being placed in the wheelchair, “instantly, she just lit up and had the biggest smile. She was so happy,” he said. “It really touched me in a way I was not expecting. I really saw that I could help more people doing this job than I can as an orthopedic surgeon.”¹

Back in the U.S. both Schoendorfer and Bayer made radical changes in their lives. Schoendorfer had extra impetus: the company he had been working for suddenly went out of business. He took that as a divine sign. At first his family lived off savings, and then Laurie went back to work.

Bayer gave up his practice, took on the mantle of co-founder, joined the first board of directors of the fledgling Free Wheelchairs Mission, and became the organization’s medical

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director, assuring the efficacy of the wheelchairs.

“There are times I miss being a surgeon, but I decided I could make a more dramatic difference in my life by helping the disabled poor,” he told a local newspaper.²

100 Million Potential Clients

Free Wheelchair Mission says no human being should have to crawl through life. But millions do. Free Wheelchair Mission estimates 100 million disabled adults and children live without mobility. They either never leave their homes, or are carried by family members or friends, or crawl by themselves. A fraction of them may be served by charities that recondition and ship conventional wheelchairs to poor countries, but it is costly and a drop in the bucket.

Not everyone approves of Free Wheelchair Mission. Schoendorfer’s stripped-down model has been criticized by some mobility experts. A primary concern is safety. There are no statistics of tipping accidents but the wheelchair is lightweight. Critics also argue that because the wheelchair is of one design, it cannot accommodate the variety of disabilities found among the recipients, leading to pressure sores or further injury.

Nancy Starnes, vice president of the National Organization for Disabilities, told *USA Today* that the Free Wheelchair Mission “is a good start.” “Anytime you bring assistive technology to people who don’t have it, you increase their opportunity for a better life,” she said.³

Schoendorfer acknowledged the concerns. But he said that the need is overwhelming. Faced with crawling all their lives, or lying in bed, the lives of FWM wheelchair recipients are much improved.

“We need to convince Americans that there are handicapped people who are forced to crawl all their lives,” Schoendorfer said. Causes are as varied as humanity: diabetes, spina bifida, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, work accidents, war injuries. The need is desperate. He tells of a church in a suburb of Lima, Peru, which announced that it had 100 wheelchairs to give away. It was supposed to be a celebration, said Schoendorfer. But 7,000 people showed up, some of them crawling for miles. “It almost turned into a riot.”

The FWM Web site tells of Duong, a 75-year-old woman in Danang, Vietnam, who had suffered a stroke 13 years ago, and had not been able to leave her bed since. Then she received a wheelchair. During the first trip outside, she would smile and close her eyes every time sunlight hit her face. Then she asked to be taken home again. Why? Because the next week was the Lunar New Year celebration. “People living on my street have not seen me for 13 years. I want to surprise them

when they have their parade,” she said.

Being unable to use their legs, or having no legs, not only means the majority of disabled poor must scabble along by themselves. Many must be carried by family members or friends. Or, they stay house-bound, becoming part of an invisible subclass.

In Fiji one of the families that came to receive wheelchairs was composed of David and his younger brother Joseph. David was 42 years old, physically disabled but mentally sharp. He was very happy to get his first wheelchair, but not more so than Joseph. Over the years, David became too big for his parents to carry. They forced Joseph to drop out of school at 14, and he spent the next 20 years carrying his brother everywhere.

The disabled poor are indeed often hidden—from their governments, which have few resources for them anyway, and from society, which shuns them. There’s an attitude toward disability that most Westerners don’t realize exists, said Schoendorfer.

“The most common explanation for a disability or any kind of a malady in the developing world is that [the bad situation exists because] God hates the individual,” said Schoendorfer. “God has caused this. It’s not an accident. The fact that you’re disabled means that you’ve done something wrong in your past life. Or your parents have done something wrong. There’s

Other organizations providing mobility for the disabled poor.

* **The Mobility Project** (<http://www.mobilityproject.org/>) refurbishes mobility aids such as crutches and walkers as well as wheelchairs.

* **Wheels for Humanity** <http://www.wheelsforhumanity.org/> refurbishes donated wheelchairs for developing nations.

* **Wheelchair Foundation** (<http://www.wheelchairfoundation.org/>) works in the U.S.

* **Wheels for the World** is the wheelchair outreach program of Joni and Friends, the ministry of well-known quadriplegic and Christian leader Joni Eareckson Tada. It distributes donated wheelchairs, crutches, canes, walkers or other rehabilitation equipment through a volunteer organization called **Chair Corps** (<http://www.joniandfriends.org/>).

* **Whirlwind Wheelchair International** (<http://www.whirlwindwheelchair.org/>) designs custom wheelchairs for production in developing countries.

something that has to be paid for here and you have to suffer for it. We don't have to help you much," he said.

Schoendorfer says Free Wheelchair Mission doesn't proselytize, but he wants people at a minimum to know the motivation behind it. There are situations where spelling out the Christian connection is not possible, Schoendorfer acknowledges, such as when the U.S. military acts as a distribution partner. Nevertheless, it is policy for 70 percent of the wheelchairs to be distributed by partners that are Christian relief agencies, churches, or community groups. Working against the fatalist worldview is difficult but essential. "So, okay, you go to somebody and say, here's a wheelchair for you, but I want you to understand something," said Schoendorfer. "We don't believe that there's a god who hates you. In fact, this is a gift from our God who is really also your God."

A \$45 Wheelchair

FWM's wheelchair costs approximately \$27.80 to manufacture. Average shipping costs are about \$7, with fees for import duties, handling, distribution and operations at \$6.37. This brings the average costs to make and deliver one wheelchair to a developing country to \$44.40. How does FWM keep the expense so low?

First, on the manufacturing end, the wheelchair cleverly uses components already produced in high volume, from the molded plastic chair down to the nuts and bolts. Also, the devices are manufactured at two factories in China, where labor is cheap.

FWM's distribution model is innovative and efficient. FWM does not have to staff a distribution department. It has something people want and are willing to foot the bill for. In fact, aid groups are clamoring for the opportunity to distribute FWM's product, at no cost to FWM. The aid groups win, by being able to give their clients and communities something worthwhile. FWM wins, by getting wheelchairs in the hands of the needy inexpensively.

The distribution arrangement also allows FWM to stay removed from entanglements with local governments. No U.S. staff is required to travel or become familiar with all the international governments represented by the recipient countries.

At the Chinese factories, the wheelchair components are packed into 40-foot shipping containers, which can hold 550 sets. FWM's Web site says it ships an average of 20 containers a month. The containers are then taken to a Chinese ocean port and transported by ship to the international port most accessible by pre-approved ministry partners, who take it from there. The partners—churches, NGOs, community groups and so on—handle all the details, from customs to the

distribution ceremony.

Half of the organizations that apply to be a distribution partner are rejected, according to Schoendorfer. Partners must have experience with importing containers, or already work with an organization that does. They must assure FWM that the wheelchairs will be given to "the poorest of the poor," without discrimination and at no cost to the disabled. Recipients must need a wheelchair for mobility and must not already have one.

Also, the chairs must be assembled at the distribution point by the partner. This requires a crew of volunteers who can take the approximately 15 minutes required for each chair. The shipment comes with illustrated assembly instructions that can be used regardless of what language is spoken. The kit includes an air pump for the tires, and an adjustable harness to adapt the chair for use by a child.

And partners must explain, where it's possible, why FWM makes wheelchairs available for free. "At the least, we want our partners to communicate the basic message that when Jesus walked on the earth he had a special love for the disabled. We're giving you this wheelchair because of the love God has for you," said Schoendorfer.

Distribution partners are small and large, local and international. FWM has partnered with individual churches, Rotary groups, and NGOs, as well as large agencies such as World Vision. In exchange, the partners have something to give to their community.

"You can almost guarantee that in a [typical urban] slum someone is dying," said Schoendorfer. "But a mission group can't often just walk in and help. However, if you have a bunch of wheelchairs, all of a sudden the doors open and then you can identify needs and save lives."

Overwhelming Demand

At the time of writing, two containers arrived in India, and two arrived in Iraq. Wheelchairs have been delivered in 57 countries. (See <http://www.freewheelchairmission.org/map.html>.) This year Belarus, Benin, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Trinidad and Zimbabwe will receive chairs for the first time. Peru tops the list for the most wheelchairs distributed: 35,252. In just one day in June 2006, over 6,000 wheelchairs were distributed all over in Peru in an "Operation Blessing" event. Other top recipients are India, with 30,260; Vietnam, 20,350; China, 15,950; and Chile, 14,300 (Free Wheelchair Mission doesn't distribute wheelchairs to Americans because of the high cost of liability insurance.)

FWM can't keep up with the requests for wheelchairs, said Schoendorfer. It has enough approved requests in hand

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right now to fill the next six months. For instance, the present five FWM distribution partners in India, where an estimated 350 million to 400 million people live in poverty, have the capacity to take more wheelchairs than FWM can deliver. Laura Ava-Tesimale assisted FWM distribution partner *Manav Sadhna* on two trips to India. She recalled from her latest trip, "It was heartbreaking to see their frail limbs being dragged along—many had blackened and scared knees and hands from years of crawling on the earth."

In May 2006 Iraqi police hand-delivered 100 wheelchairs to the Baqubah General Hospital. The molded seats and boxes of frames had been delivered by the 332nd Civil Affairs Battalion. "Here in Diyala Province there are 400 or 500 individuals who have a chronic need for wheelchairs," said Captain John Hughes, a surgeon. "This won't take care of all of them but it will go a long way." So far Iraq has received over 12,000 chairs.

The holdup is funding, of course. FWM is almost completely dependent upon donations and grants. In the midst of its mushrooming growth it is working madly to raise its profile and find new donors. While the organization is largely unknown in the United States outside the West Coast, it is slowly gaining recognition. President George Bush requested a meeting with Schoendorfer in July 2005 to hear about Free Wheelchair Mission. That same month *Reader's Digest* named Schoendorfer an "Everyday Hero" in a feature article that generated donations to fund more than 3,000 wheelchairs.

This spring, Schoendorfer and Bayer partnered for a six-week, 3500-mile, cross-country Ride for Mobility, sponsored by *Reader's Digest*. Departing *Reader's Digest* headquarters in Pleasantville, New York, on April 20, they peddled through 11 states and eight major cities. Fellow riders included a friend who pulled a wheelchair behind his bike. The troupe was followed by a support RV advertising the mission. Supporters could watch daily progress with live GPS tracking and read their blog. The riders said they became very fond of Dairy Queen Blizzards and milkshakes. (<http://freewheelchairmission.org/ride4mobility/blog.html>.) They arrived in Newport

Beach to a cheering crowd on June 16.

The goal was to raise funds for 15,000 wheelchairs (\$670,000). Schoendorfer's home town of Ashtabula, Ohio, surprised the group with a donation check for \$60,000. So far pledges have totaled nearly \$550,000.

Also this spring legendary surfer Robert August, his son, Sam August, and young surf sensation Mary Osborne hosted the distribution of a container of wheelchairs in San Jose, Costa Rica. The elder August starred in the classic 1964 surf movie, "Endless Summer," and went on to become one of the world's largest surfboard builders. He invited Free Wheelchair Mission to hold a distribution of wheelchairs before his annual weeklong golf and surf competition that raises funds for orphanages and schools in Costa Rica each year. The ceremony and surrounding events were captured on video. (See http://www.freewheelchairmission.org/costa_rica.html.)

Individual supporters have gotten creative in ways to raise funds for FWM. A 13-year-old boy, who walks on one leg, is climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, asking for friends to support him with one cent for every foot he ascends. His goal is \$25,000. An engaged couple asked people to donate to FWM instead of buying a traditional wedding gift. A Boy Scout is working toward raising funds for 30 wheelchairs as part of his Eagle Scout badge.

One Wheelchair at a Time

Schoendorfer told *Reader's Digest* that the day recipients get their new wheelchair is like their wedding or graduation day. "Without question, it's the most important day in their lives. "It's the day they get their dignity back."⁴

"There's no way we can fail at this," said Schoendorfer, "because every wheelchair is a success."

Footnotes

1. From "Wheelchair drive takes biking duo across U.S.," by Lisa Nicita, *The Arizona Republic*, June 6, 2007.
2. "Giving mobility to world's poor," by Jessie Brunner, *The Daily Pilot*, July 9, 2007; http://freewheelchairmission.org/press/daily_pilot_071907.html; accessed 7-29-07.
3. "Charity meets ingenuity," *USA Today*, Dec. 19, 2006.
4. "Free Wheels," by Janet Kinosian, *Reader's Digest*, July 2005.

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Capital Research Center is a nonpartisan education and research organization
classified by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) public charity.

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