

FROG LEGS, INC. By Russ Willcutt



Softer and smoother is nearly always better, especially when you're talking about the ride your wheelchair provides. Meet an inventor who's determined to ease your passage.

WHEN Mark Chelgren was a child, his grandfather asked him what he wanted to be. His answer was immediate: "I told him that I wanted to be an inventor," he says, "so he went out and bought me a book on rockets and another one on lasers—and this for a 10 year-old boy. He had a lot of confidence in me."

That confidence was well placed, as it turned out. Chelgren started keeping a journal of ideas around then, and by the time he'd landed his undergraduate degree in business management from the University of California, Riverside, he'd managed to fill the book. Perhaps that's what led him to feel that he needed additional preparation in order to meet his calling, so he returned to college to study astro- and geophysics. Years later—and after stints working as a manager, auditor, and geologist for various corporations—he had an encounter that would change his personal and professional course.

"I'm really into bicycling," Chelgren recalls, "and I'd just taken a

ride from San Diego to Iowa, in fact, when I met a team of quadriplegic rugby players in a bar. We started talking while we were downing Margaritas, and since I was already interested in wheeled equipment I asked them about the single biggest problem they'd encountered in their wheelchairs, and they all said 'vibration,' which causes pain and triggers muscle spasms—pointing to cobblestones as one of the worst surfaces to cross. They also said the small front caster wheels would get stuck suddenly and cause the chair to pitch forward. So I sketched out a suspension system on a napkin and told them to 'go find somebody who makes this,' and when they got back in touch and informed me that nobody offered anything like it the light went on in my head. I said that I could probably make something like that for them, so I did."

Once Chelgren had found a machine shop to make a prototype, he embarked on an interesting test run that involved renting a manual wheelchair on which he mounted the suspension forks he'd developed and spent three days rolling across every possible terrain. "It was a fascinating experience for me, because not only did I need to test

the forks, but I also wanted to experience what it's like for people to live in a wheelchair," he says, explaining that it was important for him to gain an understanding of the actual person he was designing products for. "And not just the physical aspects of it, but the day-to-day lifestyle, as well."

At the close of the initial period testing his prototype—which even involved friends in power chairs towing him over the aforementioned cobblestones—Chelgren placed the original forks back on the rental chair, and within 10 minutes he'd noticed something remarkable. "My feet grew numb, and my kidneys started hurting from all the jolting," he says. "That's when I knew that I was really onto something."

After additional testing by his friends on the rugby team—which called for streamlining the suspension forks in order to minimize weight without compromising strength—it was time to go to market, which Chelgren approached with the same attention to detail that he'd displayed in designing the product itself.

"I decided to call them Frog Legs due to their shape and because they hop," he says, "and although I wanted people to be able to purchase them directly from the company, I also realized the best way to gain acceptance would



The photo on the opposite page shows Mark Chelgren testing the original Frog Legs design, with the finalized—and current—version at left.

be to work directly with wheelchair manufacturers so that Frog Legs would be available as an option during the initial purchase of the wheelchair, which was absolutely the best approach for us and a model we're still following today."

The first year he set up a booth at Abilities Expo everyone he encountered was delighted by how well Frog Legs worked, but as is the case with any new company, they needed proof that he would be around in the future to provide service for his product. Soon, however, his tenacity began to pay off—that being a personal quality Chelgren says played a major role in his success. "I believe that people are out there thinking up wonderful ideas all the time," he says, "but they don't have the willpower or wherewithal to see it through to completion. So that's where being tenacious can really work to your advantage."

At that time—Frog Legs, Inc., was launched in 1996—there were fewer wheelchair manufacturers and designs than there are today, and he was able to develop a relationship with two of the major players; Ever-son Jennings, and Quickie. Since that time the company has designed suspension forks for the majority of the newer, cutting-edge designer/manufacturers such as Colours In Motion, Lasher Sport, Invacare Top End, and Flight ultralight manual chairs by Aero Innovative Research, among others. And the company's product line has grown, as well, with heavy-duty Bull Frogs soon launched for power chairs and the Big Rig for geriatric applications, children's "tilt-space" strollers,

and light-duty power chairs. There is also a Uni-Tine design, featuring a single-sided fork, and a Soft Roll line of extra-wide casters for navigating difficult surfaces such as gravel and deep-pile carpet in power chairs. Other caster designs are also available, along with replacement parts, and all of the company's products come with a lifetime warranty.

Even though Frog Legs—both the company and the product—are now well established in the marketplace, Chelgren says he still looks forward to attending the various seminars and conferences held around the country each year, and he is a familiar sight there, working on people's wheelchairs and letting them take his product for a spin. There is much to be gained by everyone involved, he says.

"It helps me stay abreast of all the latest wheelchair designs, and also to gather feedback from people that allows us to improve our existing products while also developing new ones," according to Chelgren. "But the thing that I enjoy the most, from a personal standpoint, is when I install a set of Frog Legs on someone's chair and watch them take off across the floor. The look on their face as they experience the smooth ride it provides for the first time is absolutely priceless, and it's a major part of what makes all of our work worthwhile." To learn more call (800) 922-2129, send e-mail to info@froglegsinc.com, or go online to www.froglegsinc.com. ☞

