

Float my boat



A caring community helped Keith Johnson get back in his kayak.

by Keith Johnson

I was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis in 2006 at age 46. Several years ago, the disease transitioned to secondary progressive MS. I now have mobility issues and use a wheelchair most of the time.

Until the disease progressed, most of my hobbies revolved around physical activity—from traditional sports like racquetball, golf and basketball to more adventurous activities like mountain biking, rock climbing, snow skiing and water sports. I mourned as, one by one, I lost the ability to participate in each of these hobbies.

But now, thanks to the Elizabethtown (Kentucky) Paddlers Association, kayaking and canoeing are back in my repertoire. My friend, Matt Deneen, became inspired by my challenges and those of other disabled individuals within our community. He made phone calls to everyone he knew to raise \$56,000—the amount it would take to build an accessible boat-launching dock at Freeman Lake Park and equip it with specially designed kayaks. The dock has a transfer bench and slide boards that enable me to simply sit, slide over and drop down into a kayak. The kayaks have outriggers to provide stability, which is helpful for people who have diminished core strength.

Of course, this effort didn't benefit just me; our community includes the nearby Fort Knox Army base, and we have many wounded warriors who can make use of it. For me, it is quite empowering to be able to kayak again. After losing so much, I finally got something

back—something that allows me to be me. This wouldn't have been possible without the help of a community that cares. Matt refers to this project's momentum as "inspiration to implementation." Sometimes, it turns out, if you just ask for what you need, people will rally to make it happen.

Keith Johnson is a certified public accountant who was diagnosed with MS in 2006. He lives in Elizabethtown, Kentucky.

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