

Wheels Around the World

Laurie Malaby had worked with disabled children in the United States for many years. But she never dreamed God would use her to bring new freedom to children overseas.

Laurie Malaby dialed the number on the business card she had been given earlier that week, never dreaming that a single telephone conversation would open the door to a life-changing experience. Trained as a pediatric physical therapist, Laurie had worked with disabled children in the United States for many years.

As part of her job with Wicomico County Public Schools in Salisbury, Maryland, Laurie often places orders for new wheelchairs when her students outgrow them. "In my profession, we can't bear to see perfectly good equipment discarded," Laurie says. "So I began storing these used wheelchairs in the basement of my school, thinking there had to be someone who could recycle them."

One day in 1997, while talking with a wheelchair vendor, she mentioned the collection of wheelchairs that was gathering dust in the basement. The vendor handed her a business card with the telephone number of a volunteer for "Wheels for the World."

Later that week, when Laurie telephoned Randy Wagner, a Chair Corps Area Representative for the organization, she was thrilled to learn that the group collects and distributes used wheelchairs around the world. Founded in 1993 as an outreach of Joni and Friends Ministries, Wheels for the World has distributed more than 10,000 previously owned, serviceable wheelchairs to persons with disabilities in 40 countries.

Randy, like the many other Chair Corps Area Representatives, collects chairs from nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and local organizations. The chairs are then shipped to

correctional facilities, where inmates refurbish them before they are shipped overseas.

Wheels for the World's outreach also includes short-term missions trips to six countries—Ghana, China, Romania, Poland, Cuba and Peru. Ministry teams are made up of disability specialists, mechanics and others who help fit the chairs and distribute them.

“As Randy described the need for physical therapists and occupational therapists to go on these mission trips, tears welled up in my eyes and began streaming down my face,” Laurie remembers. “I also had goosebumps that started at the top of my head and spread over my entire body.”

Laurie says that though she had often thought she'd like to go on a missions trip, she hadn't felt she had anything to offer. But in that instant, she “knew God was saying, ‘I have a place for you.’”

Laurie continued collecting wheelchairs and spreading the word to other therapists and hospitals in the area. She also contacted local newspapers and appeared on a Christian radio station to explain the work of Wheels for the World.

In order to expedite delivery of the chairs, Laurie began calling local trucking companies, asking if they would be willing to transport the wheelchairs to the nearest prison site for free. After several calls, she found a company that wanted to help.

In the spring of 2000, Laurie knew God was calling her to go on a missions trip. She applied to Wheels for the World, trusting God to supply all the finances she needed for the trip. “It was a real experience of letting go and trusting God,” Laurie says. “I'm a professional worrier, but I had an incredible peace and faith that I had never had in my entire Christian walk.”

In June, Laurie joined a group of 16 other volunteers bound for Poland. Landing in Warsaw, she and seven other team members headed south to Rybnik, which would be their headquarters for the week.

Each morning the team was taken to nearby towns, where they partnered with local churches to distribute the chairs. Laurie measured each wheelchair recipient, taking note of the accommodations needed for his or her particular disability.

She then selected the best match from among the 50 or more chairs that had been delivered to the site. When she returned with the chair, the team went to work, sometimes taking hours to fit just one chair.

“It was amazing to watch the mechanics take the chairs apart, add parts and reassemble them to make a wheelchair that would meet the need of each recipient,” Laurie says.

She remembers how grateful those who received the wheelchairs were. “A wheelchair is a luxury in these small towns. If the people could even locate one to buy, it would cost nearly a year’s wages.

“It broke my heart to see so many people with disabilities who didn’t have access to anything like rehab services or adaptive equipment. In America, we get wheelchairs for 3-year-olds, and by age ten, they’re on their third or fourth chair.

“I particularly remember one little boy named Piotr [Polish for ‘Peter’]. He was 10 years old—the same age as my oldest son. Piotr had a degenerative bone disease and would never be able to walk. His parents took great pains to get him to the center, pushing him in a borrowed stroller. He was so excited to receive a wheelchair because it meant he could go to school.”

Providing wheelchairs is just one aspect of the Wheels for the World ministry. Joni Eareckson Tada, founder of the Christian

organization, remembers how angry and isolated she felt after becoming a quadriplegic as a teen-ager in 1967. But God's power and strength turned her wheelchair into a symbol of hope and freedom.

Joni wants every wheelchair recipient to know that Jesus offers the ultimate freedom, so along with each wheelchair come a Bible and the good news that Jesus Christ loves every person regardless of his or her abilities or disabilities.

At the end of each day on the missions trip, Wheels for the World team members met back at the hotel to worship, pray and share. "Every day we were amazed at the 'God-instances,'" Laurie says. "Although we didn't know ahead of time which chairs would be needed at each center, God knew, and we always had just the ones we needed at each site."

The team members ranged in age from college students to senior citizens and came from many different church backgrounds. "It was a wonderful combination of people and personalities," Laurie says. "We were all different parts of the body of Christ coming together to serve as one."

When Laurie shares about her trip, her face lights up with excitement. "I tell everyone that the real secret to life is finding out how you can share your particular gift with others."

Though she is certain she will go on another missions trip, Laurie doesn't know when or where. With a confident smile she announces, "I'll just have to wait to see what God has planned." *

Sandra Chambers is a freelance journalist and writer whose stories have appeared in national, regional, and local magazines and newspapers. For more information on Wheels for the World, visit the organization's Web site at .