

Van Dusen, Tony

For the community's betterment

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Volunteering is a way of life for Tom Van Dusen.

And even a physical handicap won't stand in the way of Van Dusen's desire to help out the community.

Van Dusen was two years old when he was crippled by polio. But he's done his best to lead a normal life albeit having to use crutches, wheelchair and, more recently, a motorized scooter to get around.

A familiar sight to many in Belleville is the 48-year-old Palmer Road resident 'motoring' downtown to his next volunteer destination.

Van Dusen volunteers three days a week, dividing his time between the Gleaner's Food Bank, Canadian Mental Health Association, Canadian Diabetes Association Quinte Branch and the Belleville hospital.

He used to volunteer five days a week but had to cut back because it got too much physically.

"I don't try and push myself when volunteering," he said. "I do get a lot of satisfaction and the satisfaction I get from volunteering outweighs any physical discomfort I may get," he said in an interview from the lobby of his apartment building.

Van Dusen has been a full-time volunteer since going on a disability pension in 1994.

He's also championed the cause for better accessibility for physically challenged individuals. He's been a member of the Canadian Paraplegic Association, Quinte Branch, for the past six years.

"I want to help others out who, like myself, are physically challenged," he said. "Our main objective is to increase awareness and problems with accessibility."

Van Dusen acknowledged a lot has been done to improve the plight of the physically challenged inside the city.

"The streets are better than they were. More office buildings are wheelchair accessible but there is still room for improvement especially for stores and some office buildings."

Van Dusen is quick to point out he's accepted what life has dealt him.

"I've learned to accept it and deal with my polio because it happened to me at a young age. And I feel I've done the best I could do with my life despite my physical limitations."

Born and raised in Toronto, he was a healthy two-year-old. But that suddenly changed during a family outing at Sandbanks Provincial Park in the summer of 1953.

The youngster "just took sick" and was rushed to Prince Edward County Memorial Hospital and then transferred to Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto. He was then taken to the isolation ward at Thistletown Hospital in Islington where he spent the next year being treated for polio.

"I was able to walk for a little while after that but my leg muscles got too weak. I've been on crutches since then," he recalled.

Van Dusen has used crutches almost exclusively for most of his life until several years ago when he started relying more heavily on his wheelchair and motorized scooter.

After high school, he attended Variety Village Vocational School in Scarborough. He

graduated in 1971 and worked for a number of companies in the Toronto area, including Gulf Oil and the post office.

In 1984, the company he was working for went bankrupt. He couldn't afford to remain in Toronto and so decided to move to Wellington to be with his parents who had moved there three years earlier.

Van Dusen lived with his parents for three years before deciding to move to his Palmer Road apartment in 1987.

"I wanted to work again and I also wanted my independence back somewhat," he said.

He managed to secure a few clerical-type jobs with the Ontario March of Dimes, a local realtor and a Bloomfield contractor before it became too physically difficult for him to work on a full-time basis.

In 1994 he decided to go on a disability pension "and that allowed me to focus my attention on volunteer work."

Besides keeping active, volunteering has enabled Van Dusen "to do something construc-

tive for the community."

He spends Monday mornings at the Gleaner's Food Bank helping man the telephones and doing filing. He then motors to Century Place to spend the afternoon with the Canadian Mental Health Association performing various clerical duties.

Wednesday morning, he's back at the food bank. That afternoon is spent at the Canadian Diabetes Association, Quinte Branch.

Thursdays are devoted entirely to selling Nevada tickets on the second floor of the Quinte Healthcare Belleville General, with proceeds going toward new hospital equipment.

When he's not volunteering, he enjoys watching television, working on the computer and socializing.

Van Dusen said he's tried to make the most of his life. It's a message he's trying to instill in others who face physical challenges.

"Be happy with what you have in life, even if it's a physical disability."

Intelligencer - Mar. 26/00 p.9