

A wheelchair is just a pair of shoes

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Before 24 year old Mike Peters discovered a group called RISE Adventures, getting out of the house often seemed a daunting task to the young man born with spina bifida, who depends on a wheelchair to get around. He had no friends in wheelchairs and spent many hours at home in front of his computer. "I didn't even know the name of another person in a wheelchair, and I had never been around another person in a wheelchair until this," Peters said.

All of that changed for the Lewisville resident when he found a website called riseadventures.org. Now, Peters hand-cycles, sails, and plays rugby, among other sports, and he also serves as a program assistant to RISE Adventures, a public charity organization that wants to help persons with physical challenges gain independence through a learning experience in adaptive outdoor adventures and sporting programs. Peters said the group was formed 16 months ago and has already established many weekly programs throughout the metroplex. Some members of the group hand cycle every Sunday on the trails in Highland Village, which Peters said he considers the most challenging trails in the area for that sport. You don't have to own your own equipment to participate, as Peters said the group provides all the equipment needed.

"RISE; which stands for Recovery, Inspiration, Success and Empowerment, has made me much more active and healthy. It's easy to sit at home in your wheelchair, and at first, it's hard to get out. But the benefits far outweigh the difficulty," he noted. Peters has undergone about 30 surgeries in his life due to spina bifida, a birth defect that involves the incomplete development of the spinal cord or its coverings. The term spina bifida comes from Latin and literally means "split" or "open" spine. However, Peters is not going to let that stop him from having a life full of friends and activities. On Thursday night, he plays wheelchair rugby, and on Saturdays, he sails at Lewisville Lake. All of these activities are open to anyone with a physical disability. RISE asks that those interested in participating make reservations so they will know how much equipment will be needed for any given outing.

Currently, Peters said the group is promoting two major events. On Saturday, Sept. 27, they will sponsor an End of Summer Bash at Meadowmere Park in Grapevine. Physically disabled children and adults will be able to participate in about 20 activities that day, such as adaptive water skiing, horseback riding, and jet ski rides. There will also be face painting, a dunk tank, a children's playground and a petting zoo. All RISE programs are free, and water and Gatorade will be provided free at the event. In October, the group will sponsor an accessible haunted house, which Peters said he believes will be the only haunted house in the metroplex accessible to people in wheelchairs. The event will be on Saturday, October 4 at the Dallas Scare Grounds, 2001 Irving Blvd. in Dallas. One person with a disability and one guest can go through the haunted house at no cost, but reservations must be made on line at www.riseadventures.org.

These events, said Peters, mean a lot to the physically challenged. "It's social. This group taught me that, hey, I can do these things. It's all about getting out, doing things and feeling good about yourself." As far as the wheelchair he uses to get around, Peters said it does not define him as a person. "It's not who I am or what I am, it's just a pair of shoes for me," Peters said of his chair. He invites anyone in the area to check out their website and join them in some or all of the weekly activities offered. "Get out and get some sun," Peters said with a grin.



Mike Peters (right) helping Cameron Booth, one of the members at quad rugby.

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