

My day in a wheelchair

Alex Bernard takes the challenge to travel the city on two wheels and it isn't easy...

I'm trying to navigate my way along a craggy footpath in the city on a grey drizzly morning when a man talking on his mobile phone flicks his cigarette ash in my lap. I'm outraged. "Excuse me!" I say aggressively. He looks around but doesn't see me; "Down here mate. You just flicked your cigarette ash in my lap!" He is horrified. "Oh I'm really sorry, I...I just didn't see you," he stammers. He's clearly embarrassed by the scene that has developed because I'm in a wheelchair.

I'm taking part in the Spinal Injuries Association's Take My Seat challenge where I spend a few hours in a wheelchair in the city, trying to go about basic daily activities – shopping, getting a coffee, catching a train. The experience is a revelation.

Feeling invisible is bad enough but people also seem to think I'm either deaf or mentally impaired just because I'm in a wheelchair. It's condescending, even if they don't mean to be.

The Spinal Injuries Association has arranged my "experiment" to raise awareness about the

lives of people living in wheelchairs and to help raise funds. A group of selected business people are also taking part and have made a donation. And the need is great.

There is just one specialised spinal unit in Queensland at Princess Alexandra Hospital and, with just 40 beds, it is full all the time so there is always a wait to get in. "While you're waiting to access a bed in the spinal unit, you're somewhere else, without the specialised care you need," says Bruce Milligan, CEO of the Spinal Injuries Association.

"Our most pressing issue is to increase the services we provide. We're always struggling for money; the equipment is so expensive and it needs replacing regularly. The costs associated with spinal injuries are enormous – to the individual, their families and the community and they are borne for a lifetime.

According to an Access Economics report the cost over a lifetime for a paraplegic is about \$5million and for a quadriplegic more than

\$9million. That is based on a person living with an injury from age 20 to age 70.

About 90 people will have an accident that will result in a spinal injury this year in Queensland, most of them aged between 18 and 25 and four out of five will be male. And as the most common cause of a spinal injury is road accidents, it's not an issue that is going to go away.

My "chaperones" for the Take My Seat excursion are Kristee Shepherd, 25, who broke her back in a fall from a balcony at a party and Fin Mills, 24, who was injured in a motocross accident. Kristee was 18 at the time of her accident and will be in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. Fin, meanwhile, is able to stand for brief periods of time each day. What I am experiencing is not news to them, including the people who tilt their head and give me a sad smile. I find the challenge confronting but it's made much easier by my two partners in crime.

Just wheeling myself across the road when the "walk" light goes green is like playing "chicken"



Alex Bernard (front) and Kristee Shepard

trying to make it across in time (I didn't – a man had to help me when I rolled backwards down the kerb ramp into the oncoming traffic). Opening doors is impossible because I can't reach the handles and footpaths are like an obstacle course: uneven, often on an incline and littered with construction debris.

While I am soon seething with frustration, Fin and Kristee are outgoing and great fun to be around. If attitude is everything then these two are superstars. They live largely independent lives, go out with their friends, have relationships and refuse to be victims.

Like Bruce Milligan, I'm inspired by the people I've met and this exercise has certainly opened my eyes to see what they go through every day and how we view them, and that, too, has room for change.

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