

## In the News – *Charting a Course*

### ***"Charting a course to independence"***

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Tim J. Johnson, Leader Editor

Steve Johnson sounds like anyone else who has gone through the rigors of building their own home.

"It's a relief," he says simply when asked how it feels to see his home almost finished.

But it's more than a relief to this Le Center man; it's a years-long physical and emotional journey for the 47-year old to live on his own after a crane accident left him a quadriplegic seven years ago.

He'll soon be moving from Central Health Care nursing home into the new 3,000 square foot home, located at 745 Meadowview, which is completely accessible for Johnson's disability.

Some of the house's features are a wheelchair stair lift to move Johnson between the upper and lower floors, electric windows, a roll-in shower, and an accessible kitchen. (See accompanying articles.)

Johnson admits he didn't expect a project of this scope when he began contemplating his own home about four years ago.

"It's kind of become more than I had expected," he said the other day while enjoying coffee with friends at Mangan's. "As I see it move to completion, it's exciting, because it's turned out so nice. I didn't expect it to be so nice. Even though you have a picture in your mind's eye, it's much different when it's in the flesh."

Johnson came to Le Center in 1985 from Montana and began working in construction. However, in July 1987 he was operating a crane on a ridge project when the crane tipped on its side. "I tried to get out of the cab, and didn't get clear quick enough," he said.

The crane pinned him on the back of the neck, and left him paralyzed from the chest down, although he did retain movement of his arms and hands.

He spent nine months in the hospital on the long road to relearning all the functions that most people take for granted. "The analogy I give most often is that it's like being born again, like a baby, because I have to relearn how to do everything," he said.

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This ranges from learning to live with a loss of limbs, but also diminished lung capacity and less stamina. Bodily sensations have changed, and his body temperature isn't regulated. "If it's real cold, I don't notice it, he said. "It's really uncomfortable, it takes a long time to get back to normal."

Learning to live with these challenges is a day by day lesson which will probably last a lifetime, he said. "You just go day by day. If something happens, you put it in a category in your mind in case it happens again," he said.

"You learn to accept it. You know what the feelings and symptoms are. You just have to live within the parameters it imposes."

Johnson said that several things pull him through the difficult times: his faith in God, and treatment for alcoholism shortly before the accident. "Both have been instrumental in giving me the tools to live with this. It took awhile before you could accept it, but it's given me the strength to live with it."

Although Johnson had only been in Le Center a short time before the accident, he decided to stay here rather than his native Montana for a variety of reasons. First of all, the state's medical community is more advanced, providing the forefront of treatment for independent living issues. "It's real focused here in Minnesota," he said.

In addition, service for his specially equipped van is nearby. "Out there I would have had trouble finding a mechanic," he said.

And he found a welcoming community. "By the time I got out of the hospital, my friends were here. I'd been out of Montana long ago, so that was not an issue," he said. "I have a lot of support here...I go up and down the streets, and they don't object to that. And even if people don't know me, they always wave, or stop and say hello.

That's really a plus.

That support has been instrumental in the process of gearing himself for independent living.

"I'd really like to express my gratitude to the whole community of Le Center because they made me feel so welcome. Even though I'm a newcomer, there's been a real support group...It's all been a part of the thing that's made me comfortable about doing it."

He said he started thinking about living on his own about four years ago. "It took three years to get my mind to where I felt comfortable enough to leave total care."

He had been saving his Worker's Compensation checks since the accident to help pay for the project. "I consider myself one of the luckier quadriplegics because I have that kind of care built into my life."

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He said he originally wanted a rural home, but decided he needed to be located closer to medical and other services in case of an emergency.

What he found seemed to fit the bill, as the Meadow View area still retains the charm of country living while receiving all city services. "This kind of meets the best of both worlds," he said with a smile.

He found the lot in April 1993 and bought it in November. At around the same time he began working with Accessibility Designs on a home. He gave the rough plans of what he wanted to see to designers, who went to work on the project. Jane Hampton and Dan Augustine from Accessibility Designs and local general contractor Jim Wargelin all were part of the project team.

"I really want to give credit to them."

"Jim Wargelin has been absolutely wonderful in working with me on all aspects of the house. He seems to grasp every detail, and picks it up real quick. His work is excellent," he said.

Johnson said he looks forward to the pluses of living on his own. "I'll have more freedom of movement. I don't need to rely on being at the nursing home at certain times," he said.

There'll also be a change in diet, as he'll be able to choose what he eats.

He's not afraid of the prospect of living on his own for the first time since the accident. "I guess I'm challenged. I'm not really frightened, he said. "I just look at it as a challenge. You take it one day at a time. I'll do it like I do everything else."

Now that the project is almost complete, he's been happy to tell people about it and hopes many attend the open house. "That's a real priority," he said. "Part of what I can give back to the community is that there is life worth living after something like this happens."

His house will always be open for persons interested in taking a look, he said. "It's important for the information to get out for education purposes," he said. "It can maybe build hope."