A WHEELCHAIR WAS GOING TO BECOME THE KEY TO MY FREEDOM

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“Disability is a very personal thing,” says Pete Donnelly in his TEDx talk, available now online.

Pete took part in TEDx Warrington to speak about how he found freedom through learning to use his wheelchair.

When a motorbike accident in 2006 left Pete paralysed and unable to do anything for himself, he knew his life had drastically changed. After 14 weeks of lying on his back, Pete progressed to using a wheelchair and made a decision about how he wanted his future to be.

“Often seen as a symbol of disability, I was going to learn that a wheelchair was going to become the key to my freedom,” said Pete.

Not only did he use his wheelchair to regain his independence, he also embarked on an epic journey, travelling home from Bangladesh by wheelchair, without flying. Using buses, trains and boats, Pete rolled 5,000 miles through 15 countries over the course of five months.

And after realising that many wheelchair users never had the opportunity to properly learn the basic skills that would make their lives easier - skills such as wheeling one-handed or going up and down ramps - Pete set up The Wheelchair Skills College.

He says there are clear mental and physical benefits to helping wheelchair users build their confidence and become independent, alongside a reduction in health inequalities. And with 1.2 million wheelchair users in the UK, teaching these skills could affect hundreds of thousands of people.

He said: “Wheelchair skills are a foundation on which people can build the confidence to explore other aspects of their identity. But while it’s so important, it’s not offered as standard to everyone who uses a wheelchair.”

A wheelchair user for 16 years, Pete believes one of the most important things about his courses is that they are created by a wheelchair user, for wheelchair users.

He said: “Leaving hospital, I was keen to get back to things that gave me a sense of

normality. It was a mix of going back to adapted ways of doing old things like going

back to college and trying out new things as well – playing wheelchair sport and

driving with hand controls.

“It was only through wheelchair skills training that I got an insight into what could

really be achieved using a wheelchair. It was brilliant. No one can teach you as well

as someone who has already walked, or rolled, that path.

“Learning these skills had such a big impact on me that I wanted to give something

back. A year later I trained to be a wheelchair skills trainer and have been doing it

ever since.

“Learning wheelchair skills changed the way I looked at everything. All of a sudden,

the world seemed a lot more… possible.”

Sessions start with the basics, such as how to sit properly in the chair and pushing

both forwards and backwards, before moving on to more advanced techniques like

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going up and down kerbs.

Pete has been teaching wheelchair skills since 2008 and says it’s never too early or

late to start learning.

He said: “Recently when teaching a wheelchair skills training session, I saw a woman drop off a kerb independently for the first time – after 31 years of using a wheelchair!”

To find out more about The Wheelchair Skills College visit wheelchairskills.org. Pete’s TEDx talk is available to watch online now at https://youtu.be/EU2ZclJgqn0

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