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From chair to kayak



David Wieselmann prepares to lower himself into his kayak. Mr. Wieselmann suffered a spinal injury ten years ago, paralyzing him from the chest down. Through the ingenuity and compassion of the Seymour Lake community, he can now kayak with complete independence. The lift and dock pictured here were built by Lake Seymour residents, some of whom previously had to physically lift Mr. Wieselmann into and out of his kayak. For a story, please see page sixteen.

Photo by Luke Vidic

Injured kayaker finds independence

by Luke Vidic

MORGAN — It was a perfect day on Lake Seymour on Monday — not a cloud in the sky and the water was as smooth and clear as glass. So, David Wieselmann decided to go kayaking.

A month ago, the decision wouldn't have been so easy to make.

Mr. Wieselmann suffered a spinal injury in 2010 and has been unable to walk. His movement is limited to the range of a wheelchair, and he required friends and neighbors to lift him from his wheelchair into his kayak. If no one else was around, Mr. Wieselmann couldn't get into or out of his kayak, and on one occasion was stranded in the lake, waiting for friends to arrive to pull him out.

But on July 4 a group of compassionate community members unveiled a machine that allows him to kayak alone.

"Independence Day will never have the same meaning for me again," Mr. Wieselmann said.

In the backyard of his home, which abuts Lake Seymour, there's a dock with what almost looks like a crane. Powered by 120 volts, the machine lifts and lowers him at an inch per second into and out of his kayak without the need of another person. While inside his home, he lays a harness onto his wheelchair. He then maneuvers himself into the harness and rolls down to the dock. Four clips extend from the lift, and he attaches those to the harness. With a remote, he lifts himself out of his chair, and pulls himself sideways with his own strength along a metal railing until he is positioned directly above his kayak. He lowers himself with the remote until he's in his kayak, then he simply unhooks himself from the lift, wraps a support belt around his lower back, and paddles off.

The system works in reverse when he wants to get out of his kayak. It takes about three and



David Wieselmann kayaks on Lake Seymour. Although now a resident of Boston, he makes regular trips to the lake to paddle.
Photos by Luke Vidic

half minutes to get into and out of his kayak, and it's getting faster each day he goes out.

And since it's been installed, Mr. Wieselmann's gone out on the lake often. He lives south of Boston so as to be close to the three rehabilitation centers he attends, but he returns to Lake Seymour on weekends and some weekdays. He serves the Seymour Lake Association as a volunteer invasive patroller, patrolling the lake looking for invasive species like milfoil.

The new machine returns an immeasurable

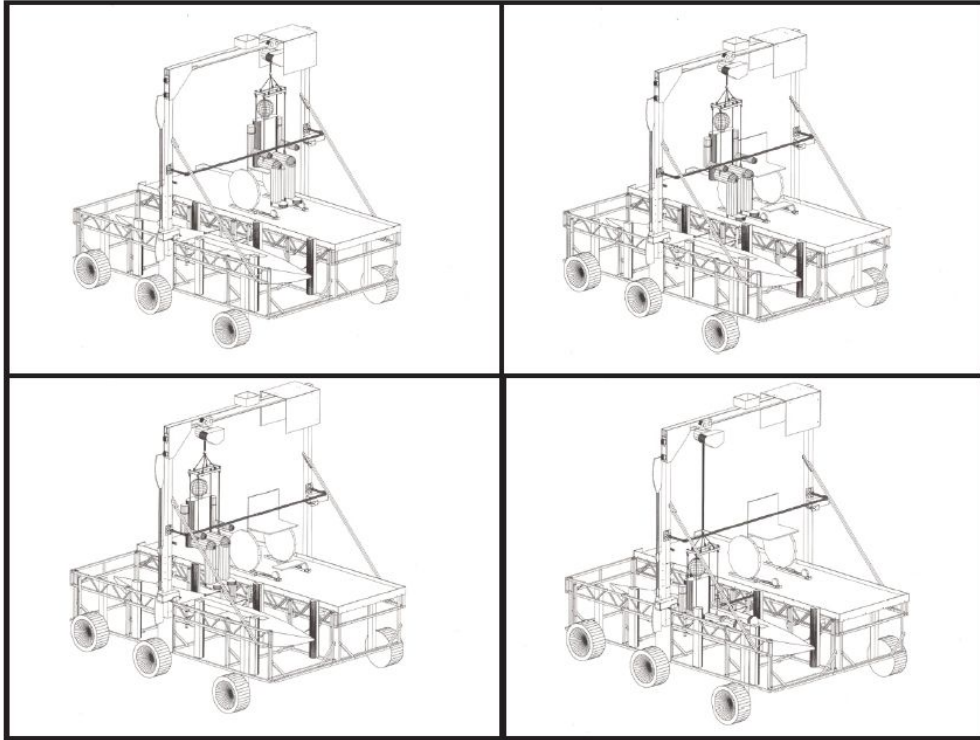
amount of lost mobility and independence to Mr. Wieselmann. Before his injury, he hiked, biked, skied, and kayaked. He was the action-adventure type, and he still is, but his injury curtailed him.

He was biking in the Burke backcountry when he went over his handlebars and broke his C7 vertebrae. He still remembers it vividly.

"Most people don't remember anything," Mr. Wieselmann said. "But I remember going over [the handlebars] and I remember laying there."

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Community comes together around one man



A series of diagrams demonstrate the lift's function. The user sits in the harness on the dock. The lift raises the user. The user then pulls on the guidebar, until above the kayak. The lift then lowers the user into the kayak.

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He said he felt like there was a rock in his neck, and he couldn't move his hands. A helicopter arrived and flew him to the hospital.

He lost complete mobility below his chest, and his body struggles to regulate its temperature. The news was devastating, but it hadn't fully set in yet. He said it wasn't until two friends came to check on him, and they saw him lying in bed, "and they looked completely horrified," Mr. Wieselmann said. He broke down crying. He felt that not only had he lost his independence, but also his dignity.

The machine is one more step in the process of returning both to Mr. Wieselmann. It's the product of a community rallying to support him. The project began as the vision of Erik Lessing, an Island Pond native. He claimed to have spent at least 200 hours designing the dock and lift system in 3D cad software. Many helping hands joined Mr. Lessing along the way. Neighbors provided additional input and perspective on the design, Gervais Ace Hardware of Island Pond provided its garage and tools, and Reno Gervais, Dan Brush, and Peter Goodell helped build it.

"So just to give this little thing for David — so he

could be self-mobilizing get in without having to ask for help every time — and to not be at everyone's mercy...it's so important," Mr. Brush said.

The whole thing took about \$15,000 worth of materials, according to Mr. Lessing. But, he said, most materials were either donated or purchased with donations. Everyone who worked on the project donated their time.

Seymour Lake Association Vice-President Rhonda Shippee said the lake association was unable to give money directly to the cause, but was instrumental in organizing fund-raising.

There are no plans to commercialize the lift system, and everyone *the Chronicle* spoke to said they would provide the schematics to whoever wants them.

Mr. Brush called it a "creative commons open-source project."

Mr. Brush, who is an electronics engineering and robotics instructor at Old Colony Regional Vocational High School in Rochester, Massachusetts, said he was excited to show the project to his students.

Mr. Wieselmann has been able to return to skiing thanks to Vermont Adaptive's program, which provides training for adaptive skiing for those who are physically disabled. It also helped teach him to kayak. The only passion left to return to is mountain biking, which he has no plans for since Boston isn't particularly great for the sport. He's replaced mountain biking with hand biking and sailing. The latter he races in the waters around Boston.

Almost every part of Mr. Wieselmann's story leading up to him launching, unassisted, into the water has involved community of support: the friends and neighbors who, for years, lifted him into and out of his kayak; the people who came together to construct the dock; and the people who are still there for him.

"I always appreciate everyone that helped me," Mr. Wieselmann said. "You lose everything — you lose all your freedom when you're in a wheelchair. You can't just get up and take a shower and run out of the house. But now I can get up and go jump in the kayak and go visit my friends, get out into nature, have a part-time job, and help the community. And have a purpose."