

## In the Press

### Steering CharterAbility into reality

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Oakville Beaver  
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A general reporter at a community newspaper covers many beats, and some weeks, the stories, despite being about entirely different things, fit together like a puzzle.

Earlier this week I wrote about Gertrude Kingdon, who has an exhibition of paintings in the foyer of Town Hall at the moment. Her exhibition is called Waterfronts, and it is made up of a selection of paintings of rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water from around the world. In the article, I wrote - dare I say rambled - about the romantic aspects of water, how its vastness is a point of meditation, an uncommon perspective from which to view our lives.

Each time I go to the lakefront in Oakville, and I've been visiting the waterfront for about 20 years now, there is a feeling of novelty, that same feeling of novelty one experiences while contemplating the stars in a clear night sky.

I cannot pinpoint why water is such an attraction to so many people, but it undoubtedly is an attraction. Perhaps it is because it is majestic in its vastness, and though it appears so much larger than we can handle, we have found a way with boats. People travel across oceans. There are competitions to sail around the world single-handedly. Many of the world's major cities were positioned on waterways to take advantage of them as trade routes. We have pretty much mastered traveling across the surface of water, yet it still appears to be so much larger than we can handle. It is one of the reasons boating is such a cherished experience for so many people. It is, at least in part, a mastery of nature, which, like all such experiences, is enjoyable, even invigorating. Yet, in the words of Stephen Cull, "people with disabilities and mobility problems are literally being left on the dock."

Cull hopes to fix that.

He is, himself, a quadriplegic who understands what it means to be able to go out on a boat. There are ways for disabled people to sail, but it involves them being taken out of their wheelchairs, where they are most comfortable and feel most secure.

"We want to expose them to the recreation leisure activities, for the first time, without taking them out of their comfort zones," said Cull.

To do so, Cull has created CharterAbility, a non-profit organization that plans to build a barrier-free, fully-accessible power catamaran that can work the harbours of the GTA.

"We're creating a vehicle where 10 to 14 wheelchairs, scooters, people with mobility impairment, can get out on the boat and they can do whatever they like," said Cull. "They can fish, take photographs, have parties, picnics, corporate functions. You name it, we can do it out on this boat." Not that they actually have a boat yet, though. Cull is still working on that. In fact, earlier this week, Cull, along with marine engineers from Toromont Caterpillar and Hike Metal Products, was taping out the shape of the catamaran to be built, while the engineers tried to figure out how it could be done. There were also about 20 wheelchairs on hand to move within the outline of the boat so everyone could get a feeling of how big the vessel really had to be.

To get the boat done, CharterAbility needs help, lots of it.

"For CharterAbility to have come this far, it has been a consortium of people who all deserve thanks, and getting this on the water is going to take many more. We need people to come out of the woodwork," said Cull. "We can't continue with what we're doing without more board members, more volunteers."

They also need more sponsors. CharterAbility launched its sponsorSHIP program in January at the Toronto Boat Show. The program, essentially, is attempting to convince sponsors to fund a portion of the vessel, and the details, along with other information about CharterAbility, can be found at [www.charterability.com](http://www.charterability.com).

The idea for CharterAbility relates back to Cull's own experiences as a quadriplegic, and his surprisingly positive response to the life change.

Cull, who was born and raised in Mississauga, broke his neck in 1991 while tobogganing on an inner tube with friends.

"Me, my girlfriend, and a couple of buddies and their girlfriends were tobogganing," Cull said. "All night, it was 'watch out for that tree,' and it was the last run of the night," and they hit the tree, with Cull seriously damaging his fifth and sixth vertebrae, leaving him in a wheelchair with only limited use of his arms.

"I'm the luckiest guy in the world, I really am," he said after explaining the night of his accident. "In the last 13 years, I don't think I've met anyone I'd trade places with, able-bodied or disabled," said Cull. "I've got great friends, great family. I live independently. This is easy."

He added, "This is one of the simplest things in the world, living as a quadriplegic... There's a lot of pain out there; I'm lucky."

It was a rehabilitation nurse at Lyndhurst Hospital in Toronto that gave Cull one of the philosophies he continues to live by.

"My nurse said, everyone's got a disability, mine's just more prevalent because I've got a wheelchair."

With that notion, Cull doesn't worry about living his life with his disability.

"If you look at all these high profile people who are disabled, they all try to look for a cure," he said, "Life's too short. People are worried about the wrong things. I just want to put smiles on people's faces."

"Just have fun," he added. "That's where CharterAbility came from."

The boat, once built, will put smiles on many faces. Cull hopes to have it on the water doing sea-trials by September, though he admits such a short timeline is doubtful without a miracle. While waiting for that miracle, Cull is holding a second Cruise for a Cause. The first one, which included donated cysters from Fishbone Cyster Bar & Cill, has



Ron Kuzyk, Beaver photographer  
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Stephen Cull, Founder of CharterAbility

second Cruise for a Cause. The first one, which involved donated oysters from Fishbones Oyster Bar & Grill, hors d'oeuvres from Julia Restaurant, pastries from Black Forest Pastry Shop and coffee courtesy of Tim Hortons, was a success, raising \$10,000 of seed money for the project.

The next Cruise for a Cause dinner cruise is on May 27 and will be leaving from Port Credit.

For more information about CharterAbility, visit [www.charterability.com](http://www.charterability.com).



**WaterWatch**

## BOATING without boundaries

Although paralyzed 12 years ago in a sporting accident, CharterAbility's Stephen Cull, still an avid sports enthusiast and outdoorsman, wants to share his love for an active lifestyle and boating with other disabled people.

With the help of volunteers, Cull made the pontoon boat available throughout the summer providing disabled people with an opportunity to enjoy a day out on the water, in many cases for the first time. Credit Village Marina, Port Credit Harbour Marina, Oakville Harbour, and the Oakville Power Boat Club offered their facilities in support of the cause.

Cull will also be appearing at the Toronto International Boat Show in January 2005 to champion accessible boating and promote CharterAbility's main goal of constructing a twin-engine catamaran capable of carrying groups of people with disabilities or mobility impairments. Preliminary plans call for a vessel capable of carrying up to 50 passengers with sufficient room to manoeuvre up to 15 wheelchairs.

Donations to the project have already exceeded \$50,000 and Cull hopes to have his new boat in the water by Spring 2006. For more information visit [www.charterability.com](http://www.charterability.com).

Disabled recreational boaters can experience the thrill of a day on water, thanks to CharterAbility, a community-based charitable organization providing accessible boating in Lake Ontario.

Key to president and founder Stephen Cull's approach is his desire to have a boat with "roll-on" capabilities enabling wheelchair-bound patrons to board the vessel without leaving their comfort zone. "We want to create an inclusive environment, one in which people can feel safe and board with dignity rather than being lifted onto a boat," says Cull.

Equipped with a promotional pontoon boat (NASCTOON), Cull attended the Toronto In-Water Boat Show at Ontario Place last September. Through collaboration with EZ-Dock and some of his friends in the disabled community, he demonstrated accessibility using "sip and pull" wheelchair control, whereby quadriplegics can drive their wheelchair forward with a breath-sensor (similar to methods used by the late Christopher Reeves).

### Mississauga man developing barrier-free charter boat service

Cull seeks support from interested people

Friday, June 4, 2004 - Michelle Strutzenberger



Stephen Cull never dreamed his 85-year-old aunt wouldn't want to go boating with him. An avid sailor, she spent her life on the water.

But three years ago when he asked her to accompany him and some friends on a pontoon boat in Muskoka, she turned him down.

"She knew that you had to climb into a boat and she felt that she was no longer able to do that comfortably," says Stephen.

Stephen, who has quadriplegia and uses a wheelchair, could understand her discomfort. "Boats aren't made for people with disabilities, especially people with four wheels strapped to their (behinds)," he says.

This particular pontoon boat, however, had been modified and was wheelchair accessible. The dock was also specially constructed for wheelchairs.

When Stephen told his aunt that he would be "rolling" into the boat, she decided to give it a try as well.

"I've known my aunt for 40 years and I've never seen a prettier smile than when she was out on the water that day," he says.

The experience was one of several that got him thinking about the possibility of providing an opportunity for other people with disabilities to enjoy the pleasures of boating with friends. Not only would the boat need to be accessible, but the harbour and dock would also have to be barrier-free and located in an easy-to-get-to area.

So began a long journey of studying the available options and the potential market.

A feasibility study in the fall of 2003 revealed there was a strong desire for a charter boat service in the Greater Toronto Area. Stephen determined that Port Credit is the most accessible harbour and dock in the area, it's close to the GO station and has ample parking facilities.

An Internet search revealed that while there were a few charter boat services in existence worldwide, most of them were converted fishing boats taking a few passengers at a time. Stephen liked the idea of catering to groups of people.

It was decided a boat needed to be built.

The vessel, designed by Captain Eric Rogers, will be a 55 foot by 23 foot catamaran capable of carrying up to 50 passengers. A fully-equipped galley (bar and kitchen) and accessible washroom will be accommodated on the single deck. Up to 15 wheelchairs could be included on the boat at one time. Stephen has launched a campaign through his SponsorShip program (see [www.charterability.com](http://www.charterability.com)) to raise funds for the charter boat.

The plan is to have the boat in the water by June 1, 2005. Stephen says approximately \$750,000 is needed to get the boat built and in service.

Already there has been an astounding display of support for the project.

Stephen has co-ordinated two cruises in the past year on non-accessible vessels. The idea is to raise awareness of the

objectives and goals of CharterAbility, the organization founded for the express purpose of providing "a barrier-free, fully-accessible charter boat service on Lake Ontario for people of all ages with disabilities or mobility impairments," according to the CharterAbility website. The first cruise raised \$10,000 for the project.

"We have had over 100 sponsors and 30 to 40 volunteers for the two cruises already, and we haven't even gone out and done the big ask yet," says Stephen.

Another Cruise for a Cause is planned for the fall of this year.

For more information about the upcoming cruise and CharterAbility, see [www.charterability.com](http://www.charterability.com)