

'Craftsmen' helps disabled get wheels

Company outfits vehicles with mobility equipment

By ANDREI GURUTIANU
Correspondent

BINGHAMTON —

When Linda Kingsley was looking for a new car, she didn't want a minivan. But because her 11-year-old daughter Rosalyn has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, her choice of vehicles was very limited.

"I was looking at wheelchair vans for a while. I had been looking for three to four years, but nothing really felt right, and of course the price was outrageous," Kingsley, 47, of Macedon, said. "I didn't want to be driving a huge econo-line bus, and I tend to like smaller cars anyway."

Kingsley found a solution she could live with through Craftsman Mobility Systems, located at 570 Hance Road in the Town of Binghamton.

"Instead of the traditional van with a lift or lowered floor, we provide people with alternatives," said Tom Egan, president. "People with disabilities are like anyone else. If you ask a disabled person what they'd like to drive if they weren't disabled, do you think they're going to say they want to drive a van? Probably not."

With 13 patents, three of which were filed within the past four months, Egan's products give disabled people and their caretakers alternatives when it comes to transportation.

"It's about expanding the choices of people with disabilities," he said. "We allow any person with any kind of disability to get into any car they want to."

Along with its wholesale distribution division, Access Unlimited, Craftsman Mobility Systems specializes in outfitting any car, regardless of make or model, with motorized devices that make getting in and out of the car easier.

One such product, the Easy Reach, uses a motor-



EGAN

ized arm that connects to a car's original seat and swings the user into and out of the vehicle, then lowers the seat

closer to the ground to make it easier to stand up.

The Glide 'n Go is another product that allows the user to go from wheelchair to car seat more easily by sitting on a lowered platform that uses a push-button command to rise automatically to the level of the car seat.

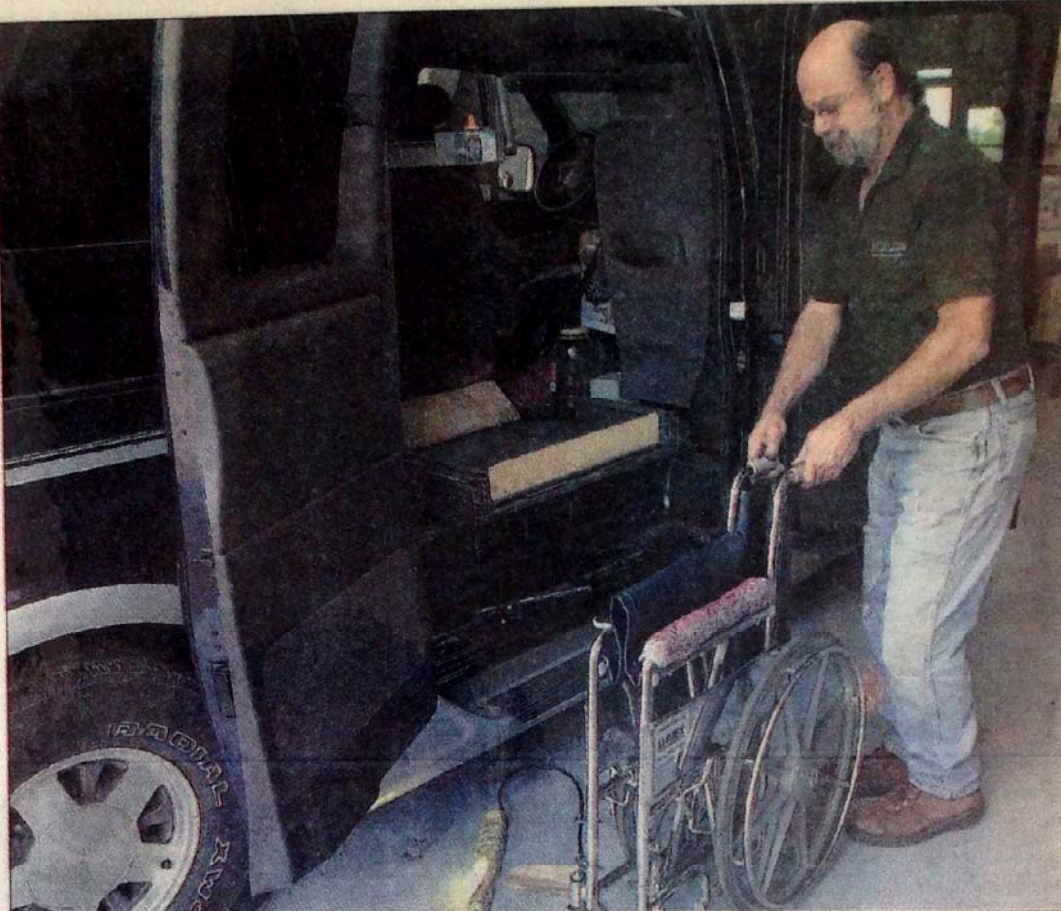
The Multi-Lift is one of the company's original products. It allows for transfer within the home from wheelchair to bed, toilet or bath. It can also be used in cars. The device is portable so it can be used in multiple settings.

"Thirty years ago it was a privilege for people with disabilities to be mobile," Egan said. "What drives our company is a change in the attitude toward people with disabilities."

Egan started his business in 1986 as a body shop but soon switched from detailing cars to outfitting them with motorized access systems for disabled patrons.

"I started it as a way to help pay my way through college and eventually started phasing out everything else," Egan said. "How we developed this company is a pathway for other companies in the area. We started doing bread-and-butter stuff, but we knew we couldn't compete with the big boys so we looked at what was hot. Health care was hot, so we found this little niche and got into it. As it got crowded, we looked to diversify."

Today Craftsman Mobility Systems and its wholesale



Photos by REBECCA TOWNS / Gannett News Service

At top: Jeff Garrett, general manager of Craftsman Mobility Systems, works last week on the installation of a wheelchair lift inside a 2002 Chevrolet Express van. The company is located on Hance Road in the Town of Binghamton.

At left: Dennis Mueller, prototype development specialist for Craftsman Mobility Systems, welds an Easy Reach transfer seat. The seat will eventually be installed in a 2004 Ford Sport Trac.

division, Access Unlimited, have distributors not only in the Southern Tier, but all over the world and have been growing at a rate of 40 percent yearly since 2000.

The company has distribution centers in Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Venezuela, Mexico, Canada and the United Kingdom. The company currently reports more than \$2 million in yearly sales and is looking into a \$2 million expansion

to meet demand, but at the moment is limited by capital, Egan said. The company employs 17 people.

"Health care is growing in this area because of demographics," Egan said. "You can't ignore all those people born in the '40s. This is what's coming."

Other companies that Access Unlimited works with have realized the same thing. Bacon Mobility in Hartland, Wis., has been

carrying Egan's products for about 10 years and has installed hundreds of them. The company finds potential clients by doing demonstrations in hospitals and nursing homes, said owner Don Bacon.

"The majority of installations are for transfer within the home, in the bathroom or bedroom," he said. "It's sometimes very small and difficult to maneuver in there."

Bacon is referring to the Multi-Lift, a product that costs about \$3,500 to \$4,000 to have installed in a car or home.

"The good part about it is you only have to buy the expensive part first and then you can carry it to a variety of places," he said.

For more information on Access Unlimited and Craftsman Mobility Systems, call 607-669-4822 or visit www.accessunlimited.com.

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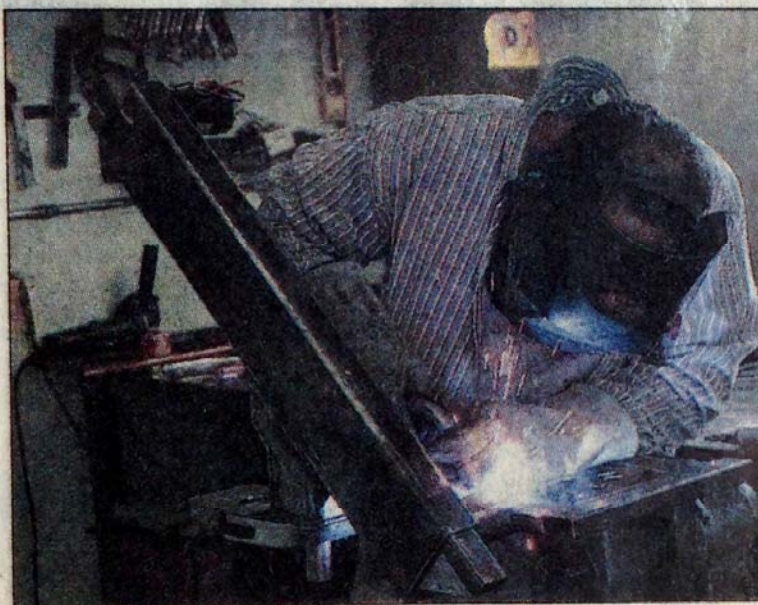
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