



FAR LEFT: Wheelchair manufacturer and quadriplegic Martin Brown has intervened to make the life of young Capetonian Masixole Khohlakala (LEFT), who's newly disabled, more comfortable. **RIGHT:** Martin uses a stick to operate his computer and cellphone.

WHEN he read in YOU about a young man who became paralysed trying to stop someone from committing suicide he immediately wanted to reach out. He found it heroic that the man was prepared to risk injury to save a life.

As CEO of Radical Mobility, a company specialising in supporting paralysed people, Martin Brown is in a perfect position to help 25-year-old construction worker Masixole Khohlakala of Gugulethu, Cape Town.

And 43-year-old Martin can truly empathise with Masi's plight – he himself is in a wheelchair after his C3-C6 vertebrae were dislocated in an accident, leaving him paralysed from the neck down.

Remarkably, he's used his disability to turn his life around and launch a now successful enterprise.

His company makes customised wheelchairs for paraplegics, and other products such as specialised ramps, medical cushions and walkers – all because he was dissatisfied with what he got when he became paralysed.

Getting to where he is now wasn't plain sailing though – Martin battled depression after his accident 17 years ago.

He was halfway through his medical studies in emergency medicine at Wits Technikon in Gauteng when, on a weekend away at a Vaal River resort, he jumped off a jetty into the river and hit a sandbank.

"It was a very difficult time for me," he says. "I was so used to being active and busy. It was like a switch had been flipped. There I was, a paramedic on the go and a dancer who did ballroom dancing, lying down and staring at a ceiling for six months."

He was confined to a manual wheelchair, which frustrated him no end because he couldn't move freely. It was only four years later in 2001 that he launched what would become a lucrative business.

He'd raised enough money to order an electric wheelchair from an Australian supplier. "When I finally got the chair it was a little disappointing because it was useless. It needed batteries that cost R1 500 and the seating was completely wrong."

His frustration with what felt like a faulty piece of equipment eventually gave birth to the enterprise that now makes him a fortune.

HE'S IN THE DRIVING SEAT

Martin's wheelchairs give disabled people hope and mobility – and now he's come to the aid of a local hero **By SHANAAZ PRINCE Pictures: PAPI MORAKE**



MIDDLE: Martin's mom, Louise, is instrumental in his company, Radical Mobility. **LEFT:** He's kept busy as a motivational speaker.

MARTIN'S friends rallied around to raise the money for the electric wheelchair and his mom, Louise, and stepdad Dave Steyn helped too. But first he needed another six months of rehab to undo the physical damage the wheelchair caused, including bed sores.

It was during this time he had his brainwave. "I realised that if I was struggling to find a way to have a normal life despite being paralysed, then others probably faced the same issue," Martin says.

He started experimenting with designing more comfortable, user-friendly wheelchairs, which he envisaged would be customised to users' particular needs.

Fortunately he had some knowledge of the design principles. Before switching to emergency services he'd attended John Orr Technical High School in Johannesburg and Roodepoort Technical College where he'd studied towards an N5 certificate in mechanical engineering.

With the help of his parents he recruited a team of 10, among them welders, suspension experts, wiring experts, an operations manager and a fibreglass expert.

They found materials and tools such as a welding machine, grinder and drills on online site Bidorbuy and created the first demo model in about eight weeks. They then created three more models to showcase at the Disability Expo held in Kyalami, Johannesburg, in November 2005.

"We landed our first client from the Free State when we showcased the four demos at the expo," Martin recalls.

"When we finally got the customised chair to the client we painted it Ferrari-red and had Ferrari stickers all over it. He was in his sixties but loved all things Ferrari.

"We want our clients to feel 100 percent comfortable in their wheelchairs."

News of the customised chairs, which cost from R25 000, spread quickly in the industry and orders started rolling in. Now there are distributors as far afield as Namibia, Botswana, Angola and the UK, who have approached Martin to sell the chairs in their countries.

Martin is excited talking about the wheelchairs. "The seating features on all our power

wheelchairs are custom-designed around your requirements," he says proudly.

"None of our power wheelchairs is off-the-shelf productions just as no two physical disabilities are the same. Our power wheelchairs are as unique as their users."

Louise, who's also his manager, says Martin has fun with the wheelchairs. "I'd often come home to find him spinning doughnuts in the yard. He once towed a Peugeot Boxer van and Nissan Navara bakkie with his chair; that's how strong these things are!"

HIS drive and determination has seen Martin scoop one award after the other over the past eight years. This includes winning the Sanlam and Business Partners Entrepreneur of the Year SME award in 2010. He was a finalist again in 2012. He was also a finalist in the industrial category at the Africa's Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises Awards competition last year.

He's also a motivational speaker who uses his story to inspire others. He's keen to show that life doesn't end when you become paralysed. "These things happen to so many people - car accidents, diving accidents - but Masi's story just intrigued me. He's a hero," he says.

Martin read about the plight of Masi, who was struck by a youngster jumping off a bridge over the N2 on Easter Sunday (YOU, 10 July), and decided to give him a wheelchair and kit out his home.

He flew to Cape Town to meet Masi the day after he was transferred from Groote Schuur Hospital to the Western Cape Rehabilitation Centre to begin his long, painful rehabilitation process.

"This is Masi's start," Martin says. "He needs to realise this isn't a death sentence."

Martin will work closely with Masi's doctors over the next few months and design a wheelchair for him. "But it doesn't help just giving him a wheelchair. I'm more interested in what happens afterwards. I want to help Masi get his independence back.

"We're still normal people," he adds. "We can just have more fun now. Yes, we may be slightly more limited than other people but why should you let your chair limit you even further? Besides, walking is overrated." ■

'These things happen to so many people. Masi's story intrigued me'



MARTIN'S SOUPED-UP RIDES

■ The Dassie 200 RWD/FWD Power Wheelchair is an entry-level model. It has all-terrain wheels at the back which allows it to be used outdoors but only on level, solid ground and not on sand or mud, for example. Optional items are front lights, a safety belt, a lap table, a drinks holder and tilting and elevating ability.

■ The Gazelle 250 RWD Power Wheelchair is a more stylish power unit with comfortable seating. It can be used indoors or outdoors and has a fibreglass frame. It can travel up to 10 km/h and has a built-in five-degree seat tilt. The chair has a steel frame, anti-tilt wheels and a 15-degree angle capability.

■ The Predator 4X4 Power Wheelchair is an all-terrain 4X4, 1 000-watt model with independent suspension that uses quad bike wheels. This wheelchair can drive through sand, mud and even do hiking trails. It has a reclining back rest and power seat elevation, and can be made with LED lights, a lap table, drinks holder and a single foot plate. It travels at up to 10 km/h and has four 24-volt motors.

■ The Standing Predator 4X4 Power Wheelchair has the same specifications as the original Predator but allows its user to stand upright. This offers an improved range of motion, reduction of muscle spasticity, prevention of osteoporosis, improved circulation, pressure relief to vulnerable areas to help prevent pressure sores, improved bowel and bladder regularity, fewer kidney stones and a decreased risk of chest infections and pneumonia.