

# the Independent

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## Climbing Toward Independence



Josh Biddle & Todd Fahlstrom

A sound, a sight, a smell, a touch, a taste—all these five senses are vital to life. What if you were deprived of one them? Which one would you let go? What if you did not get the choice and you just lost one due to some disease. That is often the case for numerous members of the disability community.

For Todd Fahlstrom, life drastically changed in 2006 when, due to his X-Linked Retinitis Pigmentosa eye

condition, he could no longer work or navigate easily in life. Josh Biddle was diagnosed at age four months with Methylmalonic Aciduria. He had to go through a lot of treatments to cope with his condition until his kidneys failed eight years ago and he went from being legally to completely blind. This is the story of how Freedom Resource Center has helped them cross paths on their journey toward Independence.

“My sight seriously deteriorated from 2004 to 2006 and I couldn’t work anymore due to my optical condition, henceforth I went to a Vision Loss Resources, an adjustment center for the blind in Minneapolis, for three months,” said Todd. “When I was legally blind and lived in San Antonio, Texas I used to ride my bike or take the bus alone, played basketball; but eight years ago all this changed,” said Josh in describing his life-changing event.

**“They are strong advocates for disabled people and symbolize the beginning of a new tomorrow.”**

Todd got his Masters in vocational rehabilitation in 2007 and since then has been heavily involved within the blind community from reading large print, to reading menus for visually impaired people. On July 1st, 2014 Todd came back to Moorhead with one thing in his mind: how to stay involved in the blind community. In Pueblo, Colorado he had formed an informal walking group of people who were blind. He wanted to know the whereabouts of the visually impaired people in the Fargo/Moorhead area.

In early October of last year, he participated in an Independent Living Skills activity organized by Freedom Resource Center and met with Tawnya Taylor, the Peer Mentoring Specialist. Todd expressed his desire to get involved and Tawnya introduced him to Freedom’s Mentoring program.

In November he started a support group for visually impaired people that meets at Godfather’s Pizza in Moorhead. Todd chose this location because, “It’s central and easily accessible via the paratransit or buses 1 and 4, and you’re not obliged to eat.” Group meetings are usually

attended by a minimum of 15 people. It can be on a walk-in process and it goes from 12:30-2:30 pm. It’s a platform where people exchange information that can help them be more integrated in the community and navigate better into society. They sometimes host guest speakers like Carla Peterson, a Fargo/Moorhead movie theater describer or Ladonna Korstad, Independent Living Advocate at Freedom.



Josh Biddle climbing the 35 foot wall

Josh heard about Freedom Resource Center in July 2014 through Jessie Shirek, a North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind employee. When asked what were his long term goals Josh stated, “Acquire Independent Living Skills in order to be more Independent in life.”

In December Todd was introduced to Josh via Freedom’s Peer Mentoring program. This marked the start of a Mentor/Mentee relationship where Todd and Josh interacted and learned from each other. On February 3rd, 2015 Todd organized a rock climbing event at MSU-Moorhead with his support group. They were given the opportunity to climb a 35-foot tall wall. This day Todd had invited Josh to join the support group for this exciting rock climbing activity and Todd was pleasantly surprised to see Josh attend the event. “It was amazing to see him not only attend the event but climb this 35-foot wall eight times,” said Todd in describing Josh’s achievement. Josh commented, “I had never done it before, but when I was doing it I liked it. It was fun.”

When asked how to describe Freedom Resource Center, Todd said, “Freedom is the gateway to independent living; it is what you want and need. They are strong advocates for disabled people and symbolize the beginning of a new tomorrow.”

## What’s

- Recognize Invisible Disabilities
- FYI Events
- Whats Wrong with this Picture?
- From Where I Sit
- Freedom’s Appreciation Luncheon

# INSIDE

## Recognize Invisible Disabilities

Many times our ideas about disabilities are limited to obvious physical challenges, (i.e. an individual utilizes a wheelchair, a cane, or a walker.) However there are individuals in society who experience invisible disabilities. Invisible disabilities might include cognitive dysfunction, neurological brain injuries, learning differences, hearing and visual impairments, or debilitating pain. While the extent and severity of these disabilities will vary from individual to individual, they share the common trait that their disability is not readily recognizable. The number of Americans experiencing invisible disabilities can be staggering. As an example, the Institute of Medicine has stated that as many as 100 million people experience chronic pain yearly.

There is an inherent difficulty in recognizing invisible disabilities, and



this often leads to individuals being either misunderstood or stigmatized. This can be extremely frustrating. Just as individuals who look disabled are judged unable to do things that in reality they can, often people who do not look disabled are judged able to do things that in reality they cannot.

This is where individual advocacy is paramount. Self-advocacy must be learned because it is often necessary for the individual with the invisible disability to speak up and explain not only their personal experience, but also their limitations. It takes practice to become an accomplished self-advocate, but it is certainly in the best interest of the individual to take the time to do so.

The understanding and acceptance of invisible disabilities is a challenge, so it is also important for all of us not to jump to snap decisions, and to be open to new understanding. It can be hard enough to deal with an invisible disability. No one needs the additional challenge of being misperceived, misunderstood, or misjudged by the people around them.

## EYI

### Lisbon: Cooking with NDSU Extension

March 5, 12 & 19  
Courthouse meeting room

### Jamestown: Journaling, Part 2

March 20, 1:30-3:30 pm  
Atonement Lutheran Church

### Jamestown

Disaster Planning and Preparedness  
LEC Room 1 & 2, 1:30-3:30 on April 10  
Call Beth for details at 701-252-4693

### Fargo: Journaling, revisited

March 26, 1:30 - 3:30  
Freedom office (Call to register)

### Wahpeton: Journaling

March 21, 2:00 pm  
Freedom office (Call to register)

### SAVE THE DATE!

Freedom Appreciation Luncheon  
May 5, Ramada Plaza & Suites, Fargo

## What's Wrong With This Picture?



Let us zoom in and see what the sign above the push button says.

For starters, how about we drop the "H" word and call this an Accessible Door. More importantly the door and opener should be useable in all conditions. Freezing temperatures when people are bundled up and may be wearing mittens are conditions the power door may be the most needed.

## From Where I Sit



*Nate Aalgaard, Executive Director*

### My Visit to Craig

It was more than a trip; it was a journey—a journey to find answers. As many of you who are regular readers of this column know, I have been struggling with shoulder pain and weakness for several months. Ultrasound, chiropractic care, exercise, physical therapy and ibuprophen have not been able to alleviate this problem to my satisfaction. My independence has been compromised, and I ended up getting an entirely different van so I could get back to driving.

This step on my journey took me to Denver, to the famous Craig Hospital. That's what it's officially called, although it really is a rehabilitation center for people who have sustained spinal cord or brain injuries. My main objective was to have a visit with Dr. Scott Falci, neurosurgeon.

An MRI taken in September showed a couple spots of compression on my spinal cord, along with scar tissue and a cyst. I wanted Dr. Falci's opinion about possible surgery to alleviate the pressure on my spinal cord. Questions I had were on the line of, "Do I need to have this fixed? Is my neck issue directly related to my shoulder issues, and; is this getting worse?" The answers, in order, were, 1) probably; 2) It's hard to say; and 3) no. So right now I am working with an orthopedic doctor in Fargo to see if we can do anything with the shoulders. I'll keep you posted on the neck decision when I make one.

Now for the journey. It started back in January when I decided to buy plane tickets to Denver. You see, I dislike flying. Who doesn't these days? It is not the fear of being that high off the ground, it's the hassle. I fear the ground crew damaging my chair. There's the precious little leg room, which is further exacerbated by the need to be lifted into the plane seat. That, on top of the indignity of being hoisted onto this thing they generously call an aisle chair. When I tell people I have to get on this "chair" and then get rolled back and lifted into my assigned (it better be on the aisle) seat, they can hardly believe it. The nearly universal response is something to the effect of, "Why can't they have a spot in the plane where you can ride in your own wheelchair?" I'm sure the airlines will say it is for safety reasons, but I suspect it has more to do with money. They don't want to give up any of those valuable seats.

Then there's the restroom problem.

Here's how many of us with mobility impairments solve that problem—dehydration. Frontier Airlines actually had the nerve to put the Universal Symbol of Access, the blue wheelchair sign, on the restroom door. I could no more use that restroom than I could jump out of the plane and fly to Denver under my own power.

While in Denver we decided to head downtown one day after my appointments. The bus system and the light rail worked well. My thanks to those determined advocates from American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT), who decades ago blocked busses and fought until Denver became the first city in the U.S. with lifts on busses. Wheelchair accessible taxi service was not so good. One company said the average wait time for an accessible cab was two hours. Another would not even venture an opinion.

All things considered, the trip went well. The only real negative was a dead battery on my van when I got back home. My overall impression is Craig is a good place to get rehabilitation. Is it the best? I don't know. What I do know is that it was efficient and state-of-the-art. It's also large, with an \$80 million expansion underway. Having been a person with a disability for over 37 years I know that they still do not have a cure for spinal cord injury. Fortunately I didn't put my life on hold back then. But if places like Craig can instill hope and confidence you can still have a satisfying and productive life, that is a good thing.

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## Freedom’s Appreciation Luncheon May 5



Temperatures are rising, the snow is melting, and the sun is shining in the region! This is a tangible proof that Spring is knocking at the door of Winter! Do you know what is knocking at the door of Freedom’s calendar? The 2015 Appreciation Luncheon! Tuesday, May 5th at the Ramada in Fargo from 12:00-1:30 pm. Come help us celebrate and give recognition to our amazing volunteers, Independent Living advocates, and businesses that facilitate accessibility to people with disabilities and hire qualified people with disabilities. Can you think of someone in Freedom’s area of service deserving to be recognized by the community that advocates for Independent Living? Do you know any volunteers that should be awarded publicly? Are there businesses you want to give an award to, encouraging them in their rightful all-inclusiveness policy? If so, contact the nearest Freedom Resource Center office.