

19 January 2022 - Overcoming hurdles

By Xu Lin | China Daily

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"Krankin' thru China", a program launched by Joshua Dominick and Domonic Corradin, helps people with physical disabilities enjoy outdoor sports like paragliding, horseback riding, swimming, surfing and cycling. CHINA DAILY

An initiative is aiming to help people experience the thrill of adaptive sports, Xu Lin reports. Joshua Dominick, 43, is helping a young man get accustomed to the swimming pool, by gently holding him. Since 2015, Dominick has been teaching wheelchair users to swim.

The activity is part of a campaign called "Krankin' thru China", launched by him and Domonic Corradin, an adaptive athlete from the United States, in 2013. It aims to help physically challenged people engage in adaptive sports to help them reintegrate into society.

"Adaptive sports are dependent on the ability of each individual, and we adjust according to that," says Dominick, also from the US, who speaks fluent Chinese and works as a translator in Beijing.

"Wheelchair users have to adapt to their own physical situation to find the best way for them to swim," he says.

"We want them to come regularly and improve and get healthier."

He says the swimming events have been successful, opening a whole new world for the members. Many wheelchair users don't get such opportunities to do so in China, and he attributes that to a few reasons. Some venues have barriers. Wheelchair users need someone who understands what assistance they need.

"Exercise is greatly beneficial to wheelchair users' health. Also, it produces dopamine, which makes people feel joy. It also helps them to interact with a wider group of people and make more friends," he says.

"Krankin' thru China" originally focused on handcycling and swimming, and now has more adaptive sports, ranging from rock-climbing to horseback riding.

Designed for wheelchair users, handcycles are relatively popular among physically challenged communities in Europe and the US.

"A handcycle is just like a bicycle, with all the same things, and it's for exercise and going longer distances," Dominick says.

Dominick and Corradin made their first exploratory trip in 2013, from Beijing to Shandong, Hunan and Guizhou provinces, and Shanghai, to interact with local wheelchair users. At that time, only Corradin had a handcycle.

The duo and three Chinese wheelchair users, including Wang Feng, a core member of their campaign, made a trip of 750 kilometers in 2016 from Dali to Xishuangbanna in Yunnan province.

In 2017, Dominick, Corradin and Wang started an ambitious 5,800 km route with handcycles from Xishuangbanna to Beijing. They spoke to college students, NGOs and social groups about handcycles, and visited wheelchair users who were in need of help.

"Among those who have spinal cord injuries, only a few go out, and it's a small circle, so we're familiar with one another," says Pan Yifei, 35, a core member of "Krankin' thru China", who joined part of the journey in 2017.

He likes adaptive sports and plays WCMX, a sport in which wheelchair users perform activities adapted from skateboarding and BMX(bicycle motocross).

He says wheelchair users should not have the "mental burden" that they are "getting others into trouble" when they go out. It's their legal right to move around and they can ask for help if needed.



Talking of changes

Dominick recalls that he didn't often see physically challenged people in public spaces in China, although now that's changing.

"The first reason is accessibility, making it inconvenient for wheelchair users to go out.

Nowadays, the non-barrier environment in Beijing is much better than that time, thanks to the efforts of the government and some institutions," he says.

Pan, a supervisor of non-barrier infrastructure in Beijing, says he has noticed some changes over the past years.

For example, ramps in front of stores on the streets have been rebuilt and if the ramps are not up to international standards, it's the responsibility of the shop owner to offer help.

The second reason is the lack of activities. When Dominick first got to know wheelchair users in China, he found that their main activities outside included dining in a restaurant, meeting in a park or karaoke.

The third is the psychological barrier. Some are afraid of coming out of their homes—they don't want to inconvenience others or they're embarrassed about being in a wheelchair.

For those who offer wheelchair users necessary assistance in activities, Dominick calls them "fellow travelers" rather than "volunteers".

"If you want to be one of our 'fellow travelers', first you have to like the sport, for example, swimming. That's a common interest with our members," he says.

"Our members will need your help eventually, but you don't have to do everything for them. It's important to make it low-key and treat them equally. We want them to exercise and to get that feeling of independence."



Activity options

According to Dominick, swimming is the most regular adaptive sport for participants, because it's accessible. The group has three handcycles, and wheelchair users can borrow them for free.

"A few people are interested in going on like a one- or two-day trip around Beijing. It's challenging, because not many people have the upper body strength to go that far," says Dominick.

"Horseback riding is very attractive. ... Many wheelchair users never thought that they would be able to do so. We're still working on how to make it a more sustainable activity for them."

A wheelchair user has to hold the saddle with his or her upper body strength. Meanwhile, a professional horse trainer leads the horse, and two other people walk alongside the horse on both sides to support the rider if necessary.

The members even went surfing and enjoyed the beach in Sanya, Hainan province. They laid on the surfboard, and coaches helped them catch the waves. The coaches also asked their students or guests to watch and help out.

Some members had a breathtaking paragliding flight, together with a professional coach, in Luoyang, Henan province.

All participants pay only the actual cost of activities, for example, 35 yuan (\$5.5) for swimming, and some venues offer them a discount. For trips to other cities, family members and friends are encouraged to come along as equal participants.

The sporadic cases of COVID-19 in China are making it difficult for them to organize non-local events. Also, participants are more cautious about going out due to the ongoing pandemic.

Starting this year, Dominick says he wants to make the activities more regular. They're working with an organization to get funding, so they can reduce the cost for participants, making the activities more sustainable.

Also, they have been invited to a national wheelchair marathon contest to be held later this year in Changsha, Hunan province, to demonstrate the usage of handcycles.



Studying China

When Dominick was a high school student, he started to teach himself Chinese, because he was drawn to the unique characters. He chose to major in East Asian studies at college, with a focus on China, learning more about the country.

He first came to China in 1998, for a one-year study-abroad program at Peking University. The learning of Chinese language and literature stirred his academic interest in China. When he finished his master's degree in Chinese studies from the University of London in 2005, he got a job that involved translation and communication at Peking University's China Center for Economic Research, which is now known as the National School of Development. He has settled down in Beijing since then. His dedication to "Krankin' thru China" made him a member of the Global Young Leaders Dialogue, a program jointly initiated by the Center for China and Globalization and the Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies. Last year, he joined the program's activities and interacted with other foreign participants. Some of them, including Dominick, wrote a letter to President Xi Jinping to express their willingness to promote exchanges and dialogue between China and the rest of the world. Xi replied to them in a letter and commended their efforts to visit various parts of China so as to deepen their understanding of the country.



Contact the writer at xulin@chinadaily.com.cn