



## ROLL MODELS 24/7

**A** new film is not something that would typically warrant an article in a magazine. However, this film, *Rolls Models: 24/7* is unique to the market. So ABILITY's Chet Cooper interviewed Charley Brooks and Andy Houghton, the producers of *Roll Models: 24/7*.

**Chet Cooper:** What gave you the idea to create this film?

**Charley Brooks:** Over Memorial Day weekend of 1997, a friend of mine was critically injured from a sky-diving jump gone really bad. His parachute collapsed at an altitude of around 1200 ft., leaving him free-falling to the ground at "terminal velocity."

At least that's what the team of doctors had determined based on the injuries he sustained. My friend lived to tell us about the jump, what he could remember of it. As we (his friends) grew to know his family that had flown in from all parts of the country, we remained

close by to lend support whenever and wherever possible. We witnessed him start life all over again. You see, my friend had sustained a spinal cord injury (SCI) and had to adapt to a whole new life, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

When I first learned that my friend was paralyzed, I couldn't conceive of how he was going live daily life, let alone return to living his fast-paced, energetic, athletic lifestyle. I had never had a friend whom was paralyzed before. I didn't know what to think. So, I started looking for material about the injury. Because my friend allowed me to be a part of his support network during his rehab, I had access to a lot of the literature given out at the hospitals and physical therapy sessions. The literature, though informative, was more clinical in content, and mostly antiseptic in presentation. I'm a visual person.

My background is feature film production, physical production to be exact. So, naturally I went searching



for videos and films about people living life while using a wheelchair for mobility. I went to the usual places where you'd normally rent a video. Places like Blockbuster have whole sections featuring the latest celebrity exercise videos and diet fads. They stock movies about people living with AIDS and surviving cancers. I naively thought they'd have something on a subject which affects over 400,000 people in our country. (Not to mention the fact that each year some 7,800 more people sustain SCI.) I ended up having to dig a great deal further into the SCI community and was eventually referred to one really great film called "The Waterdance". It brilliantly accounted for the rehabilitation period, but literally leaves you at the starting point of life post rehab facility. During the weeks following, I embarked on a scavenger hunt to find a film: a feature, a documentary or a short. Just one film that would show people with a SCI, living daily life, in today's world. I

couldn't find it. No one at any peer support group meeting could recall seeing one. Rehab therapists and social service workers said they desperately needed a new up-to-date video.

So we made it. It's called, "*Roll Models: 24/7*." *RM: 24/7* is a film that allows the viewer to spend "a day in the life" with six active individuals who are living rich, fulfilling lives while using wheelchairs for mobility specifically due to SCI. These diverse individuals are our "Roll Models" and they show us by example, that no degree of physical limitation can ever define the human spirit.

**CC:** Who's the "we" in the "so we did"?

**CB:** Great question. The "we" is me and Andrew Houghton, my producing partner for *RM*. I swear the project had its own synergy from the very start. During the early months of research and development on the project, I was spending a lot of time attending SCI peer support groups and fundraising events, listening and talking with individuals about this film that I wanted to produce. It wasn't until I met Rejena Coghlan at a Project Support for Spinal Cord Injury event, that I heard about this guy who was traveling to war-torn countries introducing wheelchair basketball and airlifting the latest sports wheelchairs in for the veterans. Jena was our link. Shortly after that event, I met Andy for a bowl of soup at Broadway Deli to discuss partnering and the rest is history.

**Andy Houghton:** People with SCI and their support system are starving for resources. It was quite obvious that there was clearly a need for current, stylized material about SCI and I had been considering developing a project of my own. When I met Charley, we traded material and found that our creative vision for the project was compatible enough to merit collaboration. Like she said, the rest is history.

**CC:** How did you finance *RM: 24/7*?

**CB:** Andy and I figured out early on that this project was not going to get funded through the traditional funding sources without a celebrity endorsement so we started considering alternatives.

**AH:** Nearly all of the funds came from private foundations. To my surprise, we received limited support from the medical supply and manufacturing industry, the very industry that makes millions of dollars off the people who we were trying to benefit. When it looked like most of the funding for documentaries of this nature was going to come from philanthropic resources, we established No Barriers Media, Inc., a nonprofit corporation, so that we could receive this type funding.

**CC:** How did you put your cast and crew together?

**AH:** I had worked with some guys on previous projects and thought they were really talented. So, we got them on board. Charley and I both cast for the *Roll Models*. We wanted to make sure that our documentary profiles were of people willing to get very personal and very real. We felt that it was the only way the viewer was going to relate.

**CB:** Especially if the viewer is someone newly injured.

**AH:** Most stuff you see on television or on video about

people with SCI are the “hero” or the “recovery” stories. Public perception is so influenced by media and often they only highlight people doing extreme things, like walking with some kind of crazy devices means they have overcome their disability. We wanted to portray average everyday people who happened to acquire a disability and are now moving forward in life. Hey, it could happen to anyone at anytime.



The cast of *Roll Models: 24/7*

which I’m really excited about. We’re definitely busy looking for television distribution.

**AH:** I’ll be the host at the Abilities Expo screenings this year in New Jersey, Chicago, Washington DC, Anaheim and San Francisco. During my stay in each city, I’ll visit schools, businesses and hospitals. The film’s diversity visits all aspects of education including children,

**CC:** How did making this film affect you?

**CB:** I’ll never forget hearing Andy say to the crew one day, “after working on this film, you’ll never see a person with a disability the same way again”. And, it’s true. I can’t even begin to measure the amount of awareness this film experience has brought not only to my life, but also to everyone who was a part of the production team.

**AH:** That’s a difficult question to answer. We faced a lot of hurdles raising money in this day and age for a vision (our film), especially under a newly established non-profit organization. The making of this film is proof that if you turn a dream or vision into a reality and when you surround yourself with positive energy and individuals that compliment your team, no hurdle is too high. It’s amazing how it works. I am certain that we were the only production in Los Angeles over the summer that had key positions filled by people who use wheelchairs.

It was crazy! At one point, I was acting as a camera dolly in my wheelchair. The Director of Photography was pulling me backwards, I had the camera in my hands, balancing the rig on my lap, filming Bob Yant barreling straight towards me in his power beach chair as he calls it, “The Sand Panzer.” (laughs)

**CC:** Sounds fun!

**CB:** It was. For all the long hours and location filming surprises that came our way, we had a crew that was still singing in the van many a night on the way home.

**AH:** And everybody still showed up in the morning. No matter what time we got to bed.

**CC:** Do you think films can bring about social change?

**CB:** Oh, absolutely! It’s a medium that virtually has no boundaries. As the saying goes, a picture speaks a thousand words. Moving pictures are capable of breaking down barriers. It’s the most powerful way I know of to reach the largest audience worldwide.

**AH:** Of course we do! This is the age of media and it is by far the best tool to influence people of all ages.

We’ve experienced this first hand during the pre-screenings. It’s written all over people’s faces.

**CC:** What are your plans for *Roll Models: 24/7*?

**CB:** Right now we’re screening at the Abilities Expos,

health care professionals, newly injured patients and their support systems, as well as employers who need to know that a person with a disability can return to the workplace. We’re working on getting video copies into the rehabilitation facilities, classrooms and health care education curriculums.

**CB:** And onto the shelves of video rental chains nationwide!

**CC:** What’s next for No Barriers Media?

**CB:** *RM: 24/7* was designed to be the first in a series of films. I am actively developing a companion piece to *RM* with another person in our creative team and board member, Jeannie Borin. Jeannie has been an educator for over 20 years and this next project is for the kids. It’s a whole educational media package that will have a video, a puzzle, an activity workbook, and a curriculum guide for educators. It’s called “The International Can-Do Kidz Club.” We’re also partnering with Chris Sheridan, the award-winning filmmaker of *Walk this Way*, on a couple of projects. He’s developing *Roll Models: Route 66*, sort of a road film in which a wheelchair traveler explores the State via a convertible.

**AH:** Our goal is to make the film available to everyone. We are dedicated to creating films that change the public view towards persons with disabilities as well as enhance the life for someone with a disability by showing there are ways to live a healthy, productive lifestyle. We are also in the process of producing a “How To” series on specific topics related to disability. We will continue to develop partnerships with companies and organizations that promote the NBM mission, like the relationship we are developing with ABILITY Magazine.

**CC:** Any tips that you’ve learned that you’d want to pass along?

**CB:** Hmmm-Can you come back to me on that one?

**AH:** When work stems from the heart, you love what you do, and you have faith, it manifests in those that surround you and through seemingly insurmountable hurdles, success is achieved.

For more information e-mail: