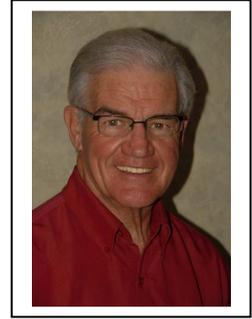


Tom Jeary



Tom Jeary's work has travelled as far as Uganda where a young man without hands can now eat with cutlery, write with a pen and use some basic tools. Jeary's inventive mind has also touched people closer to home where, with the help of a simple device, a woman rolled down the aisle on her wedding day without snagging her gown on her wheelchair.

"I love problem solving," says Jeary. "The very fact that there is a disabled person out there who can't do something that you and I take for granted is a challenge to me. I love to spend hours and hours dreaming and sketching up some gizmo that will make it possible."

For more than thirty years, Jeary has used the mechanical skills he learned as a young Air Force engineer to create devices that improve the lives of people with disabilities. In his basement workshop, he has invented gadgets that help people fish, use a camera, or operate a remote control for the television. His creations have given disabled people the thrill of skiing down a hill and rolling down a sandy beach in a wheelchair.

"If you're totally paralyzed, simple things like not being able to change TV channels can make you go nuts," says Jeary. "So giving that person a little control is a huge reward for me."

Jeary, who started out as an Air Force fighter test pilot and later moved into a career in financial services, was on a Rotary Club tour in the early 1970s when he became inspired. He was touring the Mackay Institute in Montreal and was moved by the plight of the disabled children living there.

"There were dozens of paraplegic children – they had spina bifida and cerebral palsy, and they were either in (adult) wheelchairs or lying on mats," he recalls. At the time, wheelchairs for children were a rarity, so Jeary went home and created a go-cart wheelchair for the children.

In 1979, Jeary moved to Waterloo where he continued to build devices for the disabled. He and his son, Scott Jeary, have established a non-profit website - www.workshopsolutions.com - through which he and inventors around the world share information about assistive devices for the disabled.

Jeary has never pursued a patent on any of his work and makes no money from his hobby. "There is no money involved, and no fundraising," says Jeary. "It's just me, my workshop and my computer, and I fund it myself."

However, his low-key approach has not prevented him from getting noticed. Jeary has been honoured with several prestigious awards including the King Clancy Award, a national award given to Canadians who have enhanced the lives of people with disabilities. Locally, he has been named the City of Waterloo's Citizen of the Year, and also been honoured as a Rotarian of the Year.

Over the years, Jeary has used his imagination and worked with many local agencies including the Rotary Children's Centre, the Track III Ski Club at Chicopee and the Independent Living Centre.

While many marvel at the countless volunteer hours he devotes to people with disabilities, the retired grandfather, who gets only five hours of sleep each night, admits his hobby is mostly an indulgence. Jeary once said the personal satisfaction he gets from solving a problem is something like the thrill children get from learning to ride a bike or tie their own shoelaces.

"It's a selfish thing," he says. "I do it because I love it."

Photo courtesy of Tom Jeary