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Time to thank Shriners for its generosity

JERRY WOLFFE

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Marty Sheedy wants to pay back the Shriners for the financial assistance the organization gave him earlier in his life.

Marty Sheedy wants to pay back the Shriners for the financial assistance the organization gave him earlier in his life.

The philanthropic organization operates 22 hospitals in Canada, the United States and Mexico that provide specialized free care to children with disabilities, said spokeswoman Melissa Hodge from the Shriners International Headquarters in Tampa, Fla.

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The Shriners, a fraternity based on fellowship and Masonic principles of brotherly love, relief and truth, have paid for medical care for hundreds of thousands of children with disabilities since its founding 87 years ago.

Sheedy, 22, who now is a Shriner and had six surgeries in the Shriner Hospital in Chicago when he was younger, is issuing a call to people across Michigan who also have been helped by the Shriners.

He wants to find out if former patients are interested in coming to the Shriner center in Southfield to meet and show their gratitude. Eventually, he hopes to create a national association of former Shrine patients.

Sheedy, of Dearborn, was born with arthrogryposis -- a rare birth injury characterized by multiple joint contractures, muscle weakness and fibrosis.

The 4-foot-11, 60-pound Sheedy has sclerosis, a severe curvature of his spine that deteriorated as he aged to the point where his lungs were being compressed.

One of his six surgeries involved a spinal fusion, in which a titanium rod was placed parallel to his spine to straighten his back.

"If I didn't have the surgery, I would have had to use a wheelchair and my lungs would have been damaged," he said.

He already is paying back the Shriners.

Sheedy is a motivational speaker representing the Shriners who has given presentations throughout North America during the past 18 months on how the Shriners helped him and other children with disabilities.

His next series of speeches is scheduled for Aug. 7-9 at the Shrine Center in Marquette. In October, he is to speak in Edmonton, Alberta.

"After the Shriners helped me, I just wanted to help others," he said. "I think bringing together some of the people the Shriners have helped could have a positive impact on everyone."



Sheedy's parents, Jodie and Marty, took him to the Shriners' Hospitals for Children-Chicago when he was 5.

With the encouragement of his doctors and physical therapists at the Chicago Shriners Hospital, Marty learned to walk in his own, unconventional way -- by crossing his legs over each other and shifting his weight. In this manner, he is able to keep his balance and walk.

It is called "scissor gait walking" by physicians and those with the disability.

"For me it works, and it's a good way to raise awareness about my disability," he said.

Sheedy is the executive director of his own foundation, Project Scissor Gait Foundation, where he works to educate, promote and provide research opportunities on the scissor gait walking pattern.

He also is a member of the Dearborn Commission for Disability Concerns.

Eventually, Sheedy wants to raise enough money through the nonprofit to provide scholarships for those who also have his disability.

Sheedy, who now is a Shriner and a hospital liaison of the Shrine Patient Alumni, is studying business and management after graduating from Dearborn's Edsel Ford High School in 2005.

"We (disabled people) have limitations, but limitations don't bother me," Sheedy said. "I know I can't climb a tree or hop a fence, but I look for those things that I can do. I want the Shriners to see how many people they've helped by holding a gathering."

Contact Oakland Press staff writer Jerry Wolffe at (248) 745-4612 or jerry.wolffe@oakpress.com.

FYI

If you were a Shriner patient and are interested in being reunited with other Shriner patients, call Marty Sheedy at (313) 525-3046. To learn more about the local area Shriners, visit www.detroitshriners.com

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