



Last updated: Friday, November 18, 2005

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This man has a Hart (Walker) for those with cerebral palsy

By Mary Ellen Godin, Record-Journal Business Editor

CHESHIRE — Linda Mahoney remembers the first time she saw her son, Zakary, in the four-wheeled contraption ready to roll and maybe even take a step.

"I was surprised seeing him upright and just seeing how tall he was," Mahoney said.

That was a year-and-a-half ago.

Since then, Zakary has bowled, played outside with his brother, Tyler, 9, and moves about in kindergarten with the help of the MK II Hart Walker.



Zakary Mahoney, 5, of Cheshire, who has cerebral palsy, uses a special invention, the MK II Walker, to help him move independently. (Dave Zajac / Record-Journal)

There usually aren't too many dry eyes the first time parents, therapists and doctors see children with physical disabilities move hands-free in the walker, said John Olin, a state certified orthotist. Usually children with cerebral palsy, are confined to a wheelchair, pushed by others.

But Christine and John Olin want to help children like Zakary gain independent mobility that can lead to a more stimulating and fulfilling childhood.

Certified since 1997, John Olin works full time with patients in need of any type of bracing possible, except dental. A client contacted him about a device that was being purchased in Canada, and asked if he could do the adjustments on it to make it suitable for their child. Olin was trained and certified in the MK Hart II Walker and now is one of only a handful of distributors in the country.

Olin and his wife, Christine, founded Great Strides LLC in 2003 to help bring the Hart Walker to more children with physical disabilities. In addition to John Olin's fulltime job with Next Step Technologies in Bethel, the couple operates the business from their Yalesville Road home.

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“There’s nothing like this out there,” Christine Olin said. “It makes such a profound difference in their lives.”

In two years, the couple has placed 17 children in Hart Walkers throughout Connecticut and the Northeast. John Olin visits each child every three months, to adjust the walker as the child grows. He also gives in-service clinics to parents, and physical therapists twice a month to help children get the most of the walker. One child has begun taking his first steps independently.

The Hart Walker is relatively new. It was first developed by bio-engineer David Hart in England during the mid-1980s to address the needs of children who can’t move independently. The latest model is an upgrade from the original.

The walker has three components: it combines a bracing system to align the body with a walking base. Bungee cords are added to enhance hip movements forward and behind. These can also be adjusted to address unbalanced muscle abilities. The base has four wheels to begin, but can be changed to a two-wheeled base or no base as balance and functioning improve. It also comes with special shoes that are aligned specially for the child.

“The idea is to simulate the normal bio-mechanics in walking,” John Olin said.

The “big thing”

As each child has varying degrees of limitation, so too is the amount of therapeutic benefit. But what attracts the Olins to market the walker, is that it helps children participate in more activities with their peers and family, thus helping them grow socially, intellectually and emotionally.

“We want them to be healthy adults,” Christine Olin said.

There are also important physical benefits to the child for being more mobile. The children are getting exercise to aid their cardio-vascular systems, their digestive and bowel systems function better and even their speech improves because they’re upright, instead of in a wheelchair, Christine Olin said.

David Goodwin is a physical therapist at Connecticut Physical Therapy Center in Naugatuck, where Zakary Mahoney goes for treatment. Zakary is the only patient at the center with a Hart Walker.

Goodwin said the apparatus allows the child to have both hands free while walking, to allow them to participate in everyday activities.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Goodwin said. “It really helps their ability to walk. I would recommend this product.”

The walker has 18 different growth adjustments so the parents need to only purchase one walker to take the child to a certain height, a selling point that the Olins have to keep pitching to insurance companies. He’s reluctant to say how much each walker costs, because of fluctuations

among insurance carriers that make out-of-pocket payments different for everyone. He also discounts the cost for those who have no insurance or whose policy won't cover the walker.

To get an idea of the market, a check of less sophisticated walkers from Planet Mobility with no support system range from \$798 to \$2,399 for an electric model.

To help get more walkers to more children, some friends of the Olins have set up a foundation called Walk With Pride to help parents who could not otherwise afford to purchase one. They're waiting for the paperwork to clear.

"I know there's thousands of children without health insurance," Christine Olin said. "Every child should have the right to get one of these."

She also handles the marketing, on their Web site — which has attracted interest from England and in the West, at professional association meetings and through word of mouth via doctors. She also handles the business and billing side of the business. When John Olin was first certified, there were only six distributors in the U.S. The Olins are the only certified distributors of the walker from Florida to Canada.

Christine Olin also maintains a social roundup on the Web site for the children and their parents. There are pictures of the children engaged in favorite activities, such as bowling, shooting pool and playing outside with friends. Two children have walked down the aisles in weddings.

John Olin has only ruled out two candidates for the walker and they were mainly for behavioral reasons. To determine if a child can use the walker, he has the parents hold the child up for support and checks to see if the child can hip flex. If so, he or she will likely benefit from the walker.

Olin first met the Mahoney's through a doctor who recommended the walker for Zakary. Linda Mahoney lays the plucky 5-year-old down, puts the shoes on him and buckles him in. Then she stands him up. He stays in the walker while in his half-day kindergarten class at Darcy School and during therapy twice a week.

"He gets very proud," Mahoney said as she watches her son bowl down some pins, with some coaching from John Olin. "Our big thing is to have him walk, but the thing is for him to get him through life. To be the best he can be."

Mahoney surprised her family when Zakary first got the walker by hosting a bowling party. Next May, her sister-in-law is getting married and Zakary is predicted to steal the show, when he joins the wedding party as it marches down the aisle.

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