



Up Close with Tim Balz

FIRST Alumni and Founder of Freedom Chairs of Indiana

The wheels are turning in the mind of Tim Balz.

With a love for engineering and robotics, Balz saw he could do some good. So he took that engineering knowledge and started his own non-profit charity that builds motorized wheel chairs and gives them to people who might otherwise be unable to get around.

Balz is only 19 years old and a freshman at Rose Hulman Institute of Technology in Terra Haute, Indiana. And he was only 17 and still in high school in 2011 when he started his non-profit charity which he calls Freedom Chairs.

To date, Balz, with help from donors and volunteers, has built and given away more than 80 motorized wheelchairs and other pieces of medical equipment.

He credits FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), a nationwide organization that mentors young people, with giving him the focus and knowledge to do what he has done. For several years, Mouser Electronics has been a major sponsor of FIRST.

“FIRST changed my life. The biggest thing I learned was leadership. As a student leader, I learned how to tackle challenges and work on a team. This leadership helped transfer to the creation of Freedom Chairs.”

Tim was active in sports as a young boy and loved science and math. He loved playing with Legos and taking his toys apart. He said he even got a perfect score on the district’s standardized math test. But starting in junior high, he started falling behind in his studies and began making Cs.

“I was slipping through the cracks,” he said.

His teacher Johnny Vargo encouraged him to join the school’s FIRST Robotics team.

“He inspired me to quit all my sports and start robotics,” Balz said. “My GPA improved and that’s where I got exposed to engineering.”

Soon he was captain of his high school FRC team 3487, The Earthquakers, at Plainfield High School. The Earthquakers have been recognized as rookie team of the year and the winner of the 2013 state championship.

It was while he was in FIRST that he discovered his passion for helping others. He credits FIRST for changing his life and many of his peers. “Everybody’s GPA improved.”

The idea for Freedom Chairs actually came from a neighbor.

“My neighbor found an electric wheelchair in a dumpster and asked if we (the FIRST team) wanted it to work on it as a project. There was a student who had a manual wheelchair. We wanted to give him the electric wheelchair.”

Early on they had trouble making it work, but Tim didn’t give up. He traded his moped scooter for another broken wheelchair that could be fixed. He fixed it up and through the process he learned something besides fixing wheelchairs.

“Through this, I realized that there are a lot more people who need help.”

With his FIRST teammates as mechanics – up to 15 students have helped out during busy periods – Tim began the organization Freedom Chairs to provide electric wheelchairs and scooters at no charge to persons in need. So far, he has given away more than 80 refurbished chairs to provide mobility to handi-capped people of all ages.

His workshop is housed in vacant storage units that have been donated, near Plainfield High School. Through the help of many volunteers, Freedom Chairs has been able to work out of one storage unit with a built in loft. He formed a 501C3 - an official non-profit - and has an impressive website where he accepts donations. Every cent of donations goes directly to the continuation of Freedom Chairs. No one receives a salary or profit.

“The biggest thing for me is to find something that I love and make a real difference. I love that engineering challenges me and allows me to be creative. “

One day, he plans to own a wheelchair manufacturing company where he can offer affordable wheelchairs to people in need. He currently interns for an R&D firm that hires Rose students. He is named as an inventor on an all-terrain wheelchair patent.

To learn more about Tim Balz and his charity, please visit freedomchairs.org



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