

Sushi, cookies and tears

Gratefulness for regained freedom comes in different forms to Woodinville couple

By Bronwyn Wilson
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How often does a Woodinville business owner have the chance to shake hands with a fictitious character? Not someone dressed as a fictional personality, but the actual figment of an author's imagination? It's probably not that often. But that's exactly what happened to Eddie Riveira who owns Absolute Mobility with his wife Amanda.

Turn to page 160 in the mystery novel "Name Withheld" by J.A. Jance and you'll see for yourself. Right there, a few paragraphs down, Riveira introduces himself to fictional Detective J. P. Beaumont. As he holds out his hand to Jance's protagonist, Riveira is quoted saying, "I'm Eddie Riviera. Is there something I can do to help you?"

The idea of real-life Riveira interacting with the main character of her popular mystery series came to Jance after a book-signing. She explains what led to the revelation on her website, "a wild-eyed man with cigarettes rolled into the sleeve of his T-shirt wheeled up to the table in his chair and said, 'All you people who can walk do the same thing. You think just because someone's in a chair, he has to be a noble, nice person. Well, we're not, and I can prove it.'" Jance took his words to heart. When she wanted a model for a character in her next book she decided to look for someone in a wheelchair who didn't exude warmth. In doing research, she learned of a company that specializes in vehicle conversions for people with physical disabilities. Called Rich's Northwest Mobility and owned by Eddie and Amanda Riveira, the company was located in the Maltby area—this was years before the company relocated to Woodinville and changed its name to Absolute Mobility. Jance, a

Seattle resident, drove north to Maltby to meet with the Riveiras. She never explains on her website if she found an unfriendly soul in a wheelchair. But she does say she was so impressed with the Riveiras and their story that she decided to put Eddie Riveira, just as he is, in her next novel.

Little did Riveira realize the effect his book debut would have on his company. Jance's loyal readers were aware that she likes to draw characters from real life and began calling Rich's Northwest Mobility. "Amanda and I really had no idea the impact the book would have on us," said Riveira, recalling the book's 1996 publication. "But when the book came out, we started getting phone calls from all over. People were saying, 'I'm reading about you.'" Amanda added, "And when the soft cover came out, we had a ton of calls all over again."

Riveira continued, "People were calling and I was saying to them, 'yes, it's me, I'm the one in the book.'" Then with a deadpan expression he joked about his newfound stardom, "My dad said, 'Son, I sang in church today' and I said, 'Hey, I'm in a book!'"

Kidding aside, he said the exposure in Jance's novel provided an opportunity to reach more people unaware of his company. Riveira has a personal stake in wanting to help people with physical limitations as his mother lives with Parkinson's disease.

"Our goal is not what we make, but who we help," Riveira offered and explained that his career didn't start out by helping the disabled. Instead, it began by helping people who owned fancy, tricked-out street machines. Riveira purchased an existing business called Rich's Street Rods and customized high-end street rods in his garage.

His life's direction changed when he

met Marvin Kearns in 1989. Kearns suffered from multiple sclerosis and needed repairs to his van. It was at a time when people in wheelchairs were left to their own devices if they wanted to own a vehicle adaptive to their disability. Kearns couldn't find a mechanic willing to deal with the complex electronic work his van needed. One mechanic referred Kearns to Riveira, saying "He's into high-end cars, which have a lot of electronics."

Riveira explained, "When the man showed up, he was honking in the parking lot. His door was stuck and he couldn't get out of his van." Riveira not only fixed his door, but made the necessary alterations to make it possible for Kearns to get in and out of his vehicle on his own. "Marvin told me that he had a dream for everyone in a wheelchair to have the ability to drive. I knew I wanted to be a part of that dream because of all the technology involved. So when Marvin passed away, I said to Amanda, 'Let's take his dream on.'"

The custom street rod business transformed to an adaptive conversion business and was renamed Rich's Northwest Mobility. The business offered conversions such as: the addition of a four-foot ramp allowing a wheelchair-bound person to enter the van and assume the driver's seat without getting out of the chair; electronic marvels like seats that turn or ramps that fold at the push of a button; a safety warning system alerting the driver when his chair isn't locked in; a voice command to park the car; and electronic gas and brake controls allowing a paraplegic or quadriplegic to operate the vehicle. "We're able to do some wild things," said Riveira. "I have fit customers in all sizes behind the steering wheel, from a 550 pound man to 24 inch tall woman with everything built within six inches of her reach. A gentleman from



Woodinville business owners Eddie and Amanda Riveira were the first in the state to be a licensed car dealership for people with disabilities. "I've seen many grown men cry," said Amanda. "They're so happy to have freedom in life again."

Hawaii with no arms purchased a car that allows him to steer with his feet. His car has touch-buttons which will make the car do things like go in gear or move the windows up and down."

Amanda Riveira said their greatest source of joy comes from their grateful customers. "It's so gratifying to have a business where you can help people," she said, "I've seen many grown men cry. They're so happy to have freedom in life again."

Riveira recalled a recent example of a customer's regained independence. "I just sold a van to a man who hasn't seen his neighborhood in 12 years," he said, adding, "It's the sense of appreciation and thankfulness that mainly attracted me to this business. I have a customer who always brings me cookies when she brings her van in for adjustments. And many of my customers tell me, 'I love you' and I'll say, 'I love you too.' They bring me egg rolls, cakes and sushi. Our customer base is our extended family."

As grateful customers spread the word, Rich's Northwest Mobility grew. In the early 90s, the Riveiras took their business to another level. "Up until 1992, we weren't a car dealer," Amanda Riveira explained. "But car dealers wouldn't help with making vans adaptive to disabilities. So we decided to get our dealer's license, but we had a lot of criteria to meet. Then the state gave us waivers and granted

our license. We became the first in the state to be a licensed car dealership for people with disabilities. Today, we're the largest in what we do, serving Washington, Alaska, Oregon, Idaho and Hawaii."

They're not only the largest; they're also only one of five businesses in Washington state providing sales and service of adaptive driving equipment. Three of those businesses are located in eastern Washington. In January, 2005, the company became Absolute Mobility and moved to larger facilities in Woodinville—offering creature comforts like a heated 16,000 square foot showroom. In addition to running their full-time business, the couple also hosts picnics for organizations like the ALS Association, Paralyzed Veteran's Association, Multiple Sclerosis Society and others. The Riveiras said they have been so busy they haven't had time to hang pictures on the office walls at their new Woodinville location.

Asked if he had advice for young entrepreneurs just starting out, Riveira said, "My advice is: don't be afraid of your dreams. It takes so much hard work you want to give up sometimes. And you need a good partner and I have Amanda who gives me encouragement."

He also has a slew of appreciative, sometimes tearful, customers to remind him that dreams are worth the hard work.

For more information, visit www.absolutemobilitycenter.com.