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Eddie Riveira, president of Absolute Mobility Center, with a pair of vans his company converted for use by the handicapped, at his new 16,000 square-foot headquarters at 87th Ave., S.E. in Woodinville.

DRIVE AID

Riveira's Absolute Mobility Center helps disabled drivers get behind the wheel

By STEVE WILHELM
STAFF WRITER

Eddie Riveira's career as a mobility provider for disabled people started with an irritating driver who wouldn't stop honking his car horn.

In the spring of 1989 Riveira already had a career: building and restoring the fast customized cars people call hot rods. He was upstairs in his shop one day enjoying lunch, when he heard a horn honking just below his window. Again and again.

Finally Riveira leaned out the window, and asked the horn-honking man what the problem was.

It turned out the man had two problems. He was disabled, confined to a wheelchair, and the motorized door on his van was

stuck, so he couldn't even get his wheelchair out.

Riveira quickly fixed Marvin Kearns' door, and the two men found they liked each other. Kearns started sending disabled friends to Riveira, who fixed their vehicles. Kearns and Riveira had dinner together, several times. They talked about starting a business together, to supply handicapped customers with cars they could drive. Then Kearns died, little more than a year after the two had met.

"His dream was for everybody in wheelchairs to drive cars," Riveira said. "When he passed away, my wife said, 'Let's take his dream on.'"

Today that chance meeting has grown into Absolute Mobility Center, a Woodinville-based company focused on

converting motor vehicles, especially vans, so they can be driven by people who until just a few years ago had little chance to venture far from their homes without assistance.

"It brings me joy, to see an old guy crying because he's happy to see his neighborhood, happy to be behind the wheel, going somewhere."

Eddie Riveira, owner,
Absolute Mobility Center

The company recently opened a 16,000-square-foot showroom at its Woodinville

MOBILITY: Riveira converts vehicles so disabled can drive

facility. It generated \$5 million in sales last year, building and selling about 160 extensively converted vehicles. While it's no longer the only company of its type in the region, Absolute Mobility Center continues to be one of the largest. Operated by Riveira and his wife Amanda, the company employs 13.

Although Riveira started his career as a car guy, through the company's development he has expanded his view to empathize with people who struggle with bodies limited by injury or disease. He's clearly still driven by a love of machinery and engages with the puzzle of designing vehicles to fit the unique needs of individual disabilities – but he also has opened his heart.

“The urge to drive is within everybody,” he said. “It brings me joy, to see an old guy crying because he's happy to see his neighborhood, happy to be behind the wheel, going somewhere.”

The people helped by Absolute Mobility Center aren't necessarily old nor ailing they're all just people whose bodies won't do everything they'd like.

For instance, Zach Platt, 21, has in recent weeks been able to attend Maui Community College in Hawaii where he's studying video production while working for his father. That might not seem too unusual except that Platt has almost no use of his arms, and the island of Maui has limited mass transit. So until recently Platt had been forced to rely on hitchhiking, or the generosity of friends, to get around.

Platt's family isn't wealthy, but through a series of chance meetings Platt was given a Chevy Malibu by Lee Johnson Chevrolet in Kirkland. The Malibu was then converted to Platt's needs by Absolute Mobility, with the changes funded by Maui's department of vocational rehabilitation.

The car features a small steering wheel, on the floor, that Platt can spin with his

left foot; he operates the gas and brake with his right foot. He operates the secondary controls, such as directional signals, lights and horn, through a series of switches he can manipulate through the small amount of arm control he does have.

Platt said his car has entirely expanded his own sense of what he can do with his life, leaving him “able to get a job where I can make some real money, and contribute something to the world, the planet.”

The technology that makes all this possible has been evolving rapidly. These days people can drive if they're capable of exerting just 2 ounces of force on a digital gas and brake controller, and 3 ounces of force on a steering controller. All the secondary controls can be controlled by voice.

The controls are built into new front-wheel drive vans, which are unchanged from the factory except that their floors have been lowered when Riveira acquires them. Then his mechanics take out the standard controls and seats, as needed, and rebuild the vehicles with customized controls.

Creating a vehicle for a customer usually starts out with an appointment with an occupational rehab therapist. This person works with would-be drivers, and Absolute Mobility or other companies like it, to create a vehicle that will meet someone's unique needs.

Riveira said he depends on these medical professionals, such as people who work out of the University of Washington Medical Center's Driving Rehabilitation Program, to make sure that people can actually use the vehicles he builds for them.

Frances Tromp van Holst, an occupational therapist at the program, said the process of developing a vehicle for a person can be complex, starting with an assessment, a test drive in a university-owned vehicle, and then developing particular technologies an individual will need.

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**Frances Tromp van Holst, occupational therapist,
University of Washington Medical Center Driving
Rehabilitation Program**

The recommendations come in the form of a medical prescription, which forms the basis of the vehicles that Absolute Mobility builds.

“They want success for their clients,” Tromp van Holst said about Absolute Mobility. “If there's a question about their (the patient's) ability to drive, we work in unison together.”

But with all this, it's not exactly that Riveira, 51, has left his love of fast cars in his rear-view mirror. He recently acquired a 1957 Chevy to restore that's just like the one he had in high school. He's about to open a new workshop to build hot rods again, although he said that will mostly be a hobby.

And one of his facility's buildings houses another of his loves: a 755-horsepower customized dune buggy, painted candy apple red, that Riveira races.