

Laureate: Whirlwind Wheelchair International at San Francisco State University
Laureate Rep: Marc Krizack & Ralf Hotchkiss
Location: San Francisco, California, USA
2004 Laureate: Agilent Equality Award



Website: www.whirlwindwheelchair.org

Organization Overview: Whirlwind Wheelchair International, a program of the Urban Institute at San Francisco State University, was founded in 1989 by paraplegic engineer Ralf Hotchkiss. Whirlwind grew out of Hotchkiss's work since 1980 traveling the globe designing wheelchairs to be built in developing countries from locally available materials. Whirlwind innovations can be found in many different models of wheelchairs in more than 45 countries. Whirlwind promotes the socio-economic integration of people with disabilities by offering wheelchair users the possibility of independent mobility.

Problem Addressed: Most wheelchairs distributed in developing countries cannot withstand the rigors of active use in difficult conditions. They break easily and use parts that cannot be readily repaired or replaced. Wheelchairs are not required to meet appropriate international standards for safety and durability. Cheap wheelchairs made in China and given away for free are flooding local markets and destroying local manufacture. Wheelchair users are passive recipients, treated as mere objects of charity with little say about the wheelchairs they receive.

Technology Solution: Whirlwind designs sturdy, comfortable wheelchairs for active use in developing countries. They can be made from locally available materials and are easily repaired. Whirlwind helps local businesses to build them. Whirlwind promotes the adoption of extended ISO wheelchair standards appropriate to the more rugged conditions of developing nations. Whirlwind works with like-minded organizations to affect public policy and to educate, organize and empower wheelchair users to be strong advocates for good wheelchairs and for other programs for greater socio-economic integration.

