

Making a Difference: Group Achieves Better Access for the Disabled

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Fairfax County resident Ken Fredgren is a living testament that one person can make a difference.

Fredgren, 70, developed polio in 1959 and now suffers from post-polio-syndrome, which severely limits the use of both his legs. He uses a three-wheeled mobility scooter to get around.

Fredgren and his wife lived in Arlington for 34 years, where they ran the Arlington Center for Dance school before selling it in 2002.

The couple moved to a one-level house in Reston in 2003. "Our old home in Arlington had five steps in front and seven in back and it just became too difficult for me," he said.

However, soon after moving to Reston, Fredgren said he became increasingly disappointed with the lack of disabled access at local restaurants and retail establishments.

"It was frustrating," he said. "There was obviously a need for more ramps and adequately accessible parking spots."

At first, Fredgren suffered his frustration in silence, avoiding areas that he could not gain access to in his motorized scooter. "I have always been an activist but I didn't know of any avenue available for me to take action," he said.

He later discovered the nonprofit Reston Citizens Association and befriended its president, Marion Stillson, who uses a wheelchair.

"I had been a sole advocate for 30 years in Reston in terms of accessibility for the disabled," Stillson said. "When I met Ken, I knew he would be a great leader on this issue."

In late 2007, Stillson and Fredgren decided to form a volunteer committee to address mobile impairment and accessibility issues within Reston. Fredgren became the group's chairman.

In January 2008, the seven-member, all-volunteer Reston Accessibility Committee held its first meeting. Its starting budget was \$190, according to Fredgren. To this day, it does not maintain an office, opting instead to work and meet in members' homes.

By March 2008, the group had created a brochure highlighting basic tenets of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires that businesses provide basic accessibility for disabled persons. The accessibility committee also offered to work with business owners and managers on easy and inexpensive ADA compliance solutions.

"We then just went out and distributed our brochures, evaluated accessibility -- or lack thereof -- at several business parks and retail shopping centers throughout Reston, and contacted property managers and owners when we felt there were addressable issues,"

Fredgren said. "We were initially met with resistance in many cases, but slowly and surely, we began to make some progress."

Fredgren said his group has had a number of recent successes, including getting one Reston office building to make its entry ramp less steep and convincing owners of a retail shopping center to install a curb ramp linking two existing handicapped parking spaces to a local restaurant.

"That is one of our most convincing arguments," Fredgren said. "We are potential customers and we just need an accommodation to be able to patronize your place of business. In addition to that, the fact is that you really don't want to get sued by the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice."

Fredgren said some property managers and owners willingly comply when the problem is made clear to them.

"Mr. Fredgren contacted us on April 1 of last year," said Kristina Petersen, senior property manager for the Lincoln Property Company, which manages the Hunters Woods Village Center. "He made it clear to us that, even though we were in compliance with the ADA in terms of our handicapped parking spaces, they were not located in the most convenient areas."

By October, Petersen had added two additional handicapped spaces with access aisles, a curb ramp and several crosswalks within the shopping center.

"It made a world of difference," Fredgren said. "Kristina was wonderful."

Next week at its board meeting, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors officially will recognize Fredgren and the Reston Accessibility Committee for their accomplishments.

"That will really give us some street cred," Fredgren said.

"Thanks to Ken's leadership, the RAC has helped us focus on accessibility issues not only in Reston but throughout the county," said Supervisor Catherine Hudgins (D-Hunters Woods). "We could all use some of the energy and efficiency they have exhibited on this issue. They are really making a difference."