

Barry celebrates his disability

By WILLIAM MACE - Manukau Courier | Tuesday, 02 December 2008



BEN CAMPBELL

POSITIVE ATTITUDE: Spirit Award nominee Barry de Geest and his mobility dog Bentley are happy that the award ceremony tomorrow night will celebrate the work of disabled people across the country.

Barry de Geest is living proof there are very few barriers to living the life you want to.

The business owner, single father, A grade rifle marksman and Manukau resident was born with no arms and short legs as a result of thalidomide poisoning.

But his disability hasn't held him back since he moved from his hometown of Oamaru at 18 to live independently in Wellington and Auckland.

"The barriers are what you make them in the sense that you're only limited by what you think," he says.

Mr de Geest's business, Renaissance Group, helps disabled Aucklanders get the most out of life and he says there's a lot more opportunities out there than they think.

"We get a lot of people who have lived in residential facilities and they want to move out. They've got quite high needs and people are worried they're not going to achieve so they've kept them sheltered.

"Once people start realising they're capable of things it opens up their whole world."

After working with CCS Disability Action and the Health Ministry Mr de Geest and his able-bodied business partner Carmel Henry decided to offer a unique service so they set up the business.

He says support from the community and friends is imperative for success.

"People who believe in you are the biggest thing you can have.

"If you've got people who can buy into your dream it makes it so much easier to achieve things and that's what Renaissance is about – buying into people's dreams and actually helping them achieve them.

"It's a real pleasure to come to work when you're actually supporting people to do what they want to do.

"When people have told them for years that they weren't independent and they couldn't do things – to give them the ability to do it and watch them thrive, it's really exciting."

Mr de Geest's work with the community and his will to celebrate disability rather than view it as an affliction has seen him nominated as a finalist for a Spirit Award at the inaugural Attitude Awards.

The awards will be presented tomorrow.

"I'm not a person who likes awards. It's more because I enjoy my work, I'm not looking for accolades.

"These awards are about celebrating disability and saying it's okay to be disabled."

The Spirit Award is dedicated to someone who embodies the positive spirit of the Attitude TV series which focuses on disabled issues and personalities.

"Often you hear words such as inflicted or confined but I'm not confined to a wheelchair, I'm a wheelchair user. So we talk about the positives of being disabled and there's a lot to be positive about. All it needs is for people to change their way of looking at things."

Mr de Geest is looking forward to the glitz and glamour of the black tie event at SkyCity but he'll be back in Papatoetoe on Thursday helping people realise their potential.

And they continue to help him realise his.

"The world is a good place – I have issues at times and people always come and help. I fell out of my wheelchair in the middle of Ti Rakau Drive one day. I went flying on to the middle of the road and all the people stopped their cars and a guy came and picked me up and put me back in my wheelchair. To me that's what life's all about – we need the support of the community.

"We hear the negatives about Auckland or south Auckland but I've found it to be really positive and I've really enjoyed living here. I wouldn't move now."