

Quadriplegic gets his mobility back

By Lumka Ollphant

Johannesburger Martin Brown's life is a study of triumph over adversity.

After Brown was involved in an accident that left him quadriplegic, his main wish was to "get a little bit of my life back".

Brown was injured in December 1997 when he dived off a jetty on the Vaal River and hit a sandbank under the water, breaking his neck.

Before the accident he had been involved in many sports and was a very active person. After his accident he wanted his independence back, but little did he know that there was no wheelchair available in South Africa that could fulfil his wish.

"I could only find one in Australia and it cost me R120 000 to import it from the company, Australia's Magic Mobility.

"After being hospitalised and coming back home, I wanted a wheelchair that could allow me to work independently, but I was puzzled that I couldn't find a suitable wheelchair anywhere in South Africa. It took me three



Martin Brown shows off his new mobile wheelchair.

Photograph: Moeketsi Moticoe

years to raise the money," said Brown.

He wanted a wheelchair that could travel on the beach, drive on grass and go up stairs.

"After I imported the wheelchair from Australia, I sat down and thought that there must be many other people who can't afford to import a wheelchair and want to have their lives back.

I then thought it be would a good idea to build one for other

people in my position," he said.

Brown decided to design a wheelchair that was manufactured in South Africa, and was durable and comfortable. Last year he started a company, Radical Mobility, together with business partner Pieter Nell.

"I sat in front of my computer and used the Caddie program to build it, and now people in my position can get the wheelchair here at home. It has a reclining and tilting seat, full lighting, is fully adjustable for the beach and rugged terrain, and it can climb six-inch [15cm] steps. It can be chin, foot or hand controlled, depending on the needs of the patient," explained Brown.

Even though his wheelchairs are more reasonably priced than the one he bought from Australia, it still doesn't come cheap. It costs between R17 000 and R70 000, depending on the features required.

And Brown hasn't stopped trying to make sure that the life of disabled people is improved. He is studying towards a degree in information technology via Unisa, and has started building a computer that can be used by the disabled, particularly quadriplegics.