

## MARTIN BROWN

Radical Mobility

## SMALL BUSINESS WINNER

## A Natural Born Entrepreneur



**W**HEN MARTIN BROWN BROKE HIS NECK IN 1997 diving into a sandbank off a jetty along the Vaal River, he could have resigned himself to a fate of someone else looking after him for the rest of his life. Instead, he used his time in ICU to plan which new skills he would need to learn to cope with life as a paraplegic.

At the time of his accident, Brown was studying to be an emergency medical technician, or EMT. He was also an adrenaline junkie who enjoyed scuba diving and free climbing, a professional ballroom dance instructor and six times South African acrobatic dance champion. Suddenly faced with never being able to walk or use his arms and hands again, the experience could have been crushing for such an active personality as Brown. The past 13 years have shown instead how he has channelled that energy into creating his own successful business.

"I spent three years believing that I would be the exception and I would walk again," he admits. "It's a stage that everyone who loses the use of a limb goes through. It takes time to accept your fate." Yet despite this denial, Brown is not by nature someone who can sit idly and let life pass him by.

First, he learnt to operate a computer through his voice alone. "Even if I did get the use of my limbs back, who knew when that would be? I needed to be able to interact with my world, and that meant new skills." Those skills also lit the proverbial fire in Brown to start his own business. "I needed to be doing something meaningful, but in the first few years out of rehab I didn't yet have an electric chair. My mother had to push me wherever I needed to go. Working in a normal environment was out of the question. My only option was to create something for myself."

So, he used the internet and his new skills to teach himself to design websites. Following on from that, he needed to expand his own skills set and he enrolled for an IT tech degree at UNISA. Meanwhile, Brown's own personal experience with living in a wheelchair had begun to shape a business idea. "My first chair's seat and backrest was made of canvas and I kept sliding out of it. Eventually we

welded a Jetta car seat onto the frame which made a world of difference to my comfort. What people who are not disabled often miss is how important it is to sit properly. A bad seat can cause further muscle atrophy, spinal curvature or day-in and day-out discomfort because of the angle you are sitting in."

Brown began researching what was available on the market and found an Australian company that produced mechanised chairs and had an agency in South Africa. "I needed a mechanised chair for myself, but the research gave me insight into the market as a whole." And then the chair was delivered the wrong size and without a battery. "I received a mechanised chair that I couldn't use. It was a bad experience and indicative of the kind of support that people in my situation experience. That chair cost me R64 000 almost a decade ago. Today it costs R175 000. Surely a strong level of service can be expected with that kind of price tag, not to mention getting the right product?"

Determined to enter the market of mechanised chairs, Brown enlisted the help of a former client whose website he had designed to hand-make the chair frames. He also struck a deal with Caddy, a company that produces computer-aided design programmes, who sponsored him a programme, and he began designing mechanised wheelchairs.

"We started in our garage with a welder and a grinder that we had bought on Bid-or-Buy, built a prototype and approached Business Partners for a R500 000 loan," says Brown. And Radical Mobility was born.

## WINNING FORMULA

## CATEGORY CRITERIA

Business with a turnover of less than R20 million.

## NATURE OF BUSINESS

Engineering mobility for accessibility.

## PERCENTAGE GROWTH

xxxxx: need from client

## JUDGES' STAND-OUT FACTOR

Martin's commitment to innovation and his forward thinking gave him the edge in this category.

## THE CHALLENGES

Brown's challenges extend beyond the normal realm of entrepreneurship, yet these very challenges have provided opportunities as well. Living as a paraplegic has given Brown first-hand experience of the challenges disabled people face, and the products on the market to address these challenges. This knowledge, combined with extensive market research and an undeniably strong entrepreneurial spirit have formed the basis of a very successful company.

## THE DIFFERENTIATOR

"I have focused on growth and extending my product line rather than simply resting on a few successful designs. One of my rules is that we need to add a new product to our line every year. We also keep our overheads low and we manufacture the chairs by hand, so although they are very sophisticated, they are also priced lower than imported chairs. But most importantly, we evaluate each of our clients and their specific needs. We go to their homes and office environments so that we can gauge the space they are operating in, what their needs are, their level of injury and ultimately which of our products offers them the best solution. We build our solutions around our clients."

## MARTIN'S SECRET TO SUCCESS

"Always remain focused and look to the next challenge. My clients all need mechanised wheelchairs, but many of them also need infrared voice activated switches and doors. They need voice activated computer systems and software, and they need better ways of getting into vehicles. This gives me a range of areas of growth, and allows me to offer my clients complete solutions. It's important to recognise opportunities and then find the best way to make the most of them." •