

David Beckett: Wheelchair Gymnast

By Bill Mason

Gathering momentum as he sails downhill at seemingly breakneck speed, JPL's wheelchair gymnast once again serenely and skillfully navigates his way through the Lab, its roads and the traffic. Onlookers wonder how he does it — many even silently cheer him on. Others watch with furrowed brows, revealing their concern.



Still, David Beckett, 32, knows he can “send the wheelchair down a 60-degree slope at 30 miles per hour toward a 10-foot brick wall, and come out on the other side, unscathed.”

Even without a gravity assist, Beckett moves through doors, over curbs and up sloping sidewalks in a way that looks almost effortless.

But it was not always so. Born with a congenital defect that severely limits the use of his legs, Beckett spent the first 10 years of his life in a hospital. His first experience with getting himself around in a wheelchair came when he was finally released.

“I went down the driveway in front of a house,” Beckett said. “I fell over when I came to a little gap where the driveway met the street. I was like a turtle on its back. I felt really helpless.”

The kid who used an electric gurney to race around the hospital corridors acquired an interest in gymnastics and swimming in junior high school. Both the parallel bars and rings taught him balance while also developing his strength. Beckett applied what he learned to the wheelchair.

At about 20, the gymnast discovered jazz. “I learned rhythm and tempo, grace and fluidity — and I can use these concepts as I move,” he said.

Because Beckett has merged the discipline of gymnastics with the artistry of jazz, getting around in a wheelchair is not simply a task he endures: It becomes a form of expression.

“It’s almost like a little drama — there’s conflict and resolution, and it’s a lot of fun,” he said.

Although he enjoys the wheelchair, Beckett usually uses his crutches in his Northridge apartment. The Lab, however, provides a place where he can experience that “wonderful sensation of flight.” He adds, “It’s almost like surfing.”

Beckett came to JPL in March 1988 to work on data management for the All Source Analysis System project for the Army. He enjoys his work because he has found purpose in it. “The most important role that one can play is being part of a community of good, intelligent people who are doing something for the benefit of everyone,” he said. For Beckett, JPL is that community.

The sprawling, almost rustic nature of the Lab also appeals to Beckett, even though there are significant changes of elevation because it is nestled against the foothills. The first floor of one building is often higher than the fourth floor of another.

JPL is very accessible to people in wheelchairs, however, according to Beckett. There is hardly a building he can't get in to, or a sidewalk he can't get on to. After recalling the wheelchair lifts, elevators, ramps and dips in curbs that are on Lab, he added, “If things were any more accessible, I'd almost feel pampered.”

Beckett enjoyed finding his “labyrinth of access points,” and said he can “fly down the surface streets and find a way back to the top without doing too much ‘hill work.’”

Some are concerned about the potential for accidents when Beckett rolls through the streets. He acknowledges that those who have a responsibility for safety have a right to examine what he does, and he also accepts his responsibility to do it safely. He wants no special consideration, but he values his freedom to move.

Able-bodied people sometimes have preconceived ideas about what a disabled person can do. The perceptions usually fall short of the potential.

“Able-bodied people expect those with disabilities to be limited, so when we act beyond the ‘limitations,’ there is surprise and even concern,” Beckett said. “There is no reason why someone in a wheelchair should necessarily be more limited than anyone else.”

People at JPL generally enjoy watching Beckett, although he is not always sure why. “I like to think that it's simply seeing somebody doing something well — whether in a wheelchair or on a skateboard,” he said.

There are occasions when Beckett must deal with insults related to his disability, sometimes unwitting, and at other times, deliberate. As a result, he has cultivated an attitude that allows him to draw on his own strength and self-respect, while avoiding cynicism and bitterness.

The resulting confidence displayed by Beckett is not forced. It is a natural part of his view of the world. “It's up to each individual to make of his own life everything it can and should be,” he said.

While he will not admit to having anyone special in his life, the wheelchair gymnast does admit to a passion for old movies, history, philosophy and writing.

Beckett would “like to pursue a writing career.” He is particularly interested in satire — a form that complements his dry wit and understated sense of humor.

The gymnast-philosopher sees art as “food for the soul” and is determined that his work will be “good, satisfying art” that makes a healthful contribution.

The boy who once felt “like a turtle on its back” has grown into a man who thrives on challenge. One cannot say with certainty what Beckett will be doing in one, five or 10 years — but it is certain he will be having fun as he continues to explore life, and that others will still be wondering how he does it.