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BUILDING A BARRIER-FREE CITY TO CATER FOR EVERYONE'S NEEDS

WHEELMAN -
LAU SHIU FUNG

FROM HIS OWN NEEDS TO SOCIAL NEEDS

Fung, who suffers from spinal muscular atrophy, started to use a wheelchair in Form 3; since then, he experiences a lot of inconvenience almost every day. Living in the southern part of Hong Kong Island, his travel time to PolyU is several times longer than usual. Since the bus stop is at the entrance of the tunnel, no assistive facility is available for him to go to the bus stop by himself. He has to ask the staff to help him every day, and one time, it took more than an hour for him to receive help. In addition to that, the Hung Hom bus station is next to the train station, so the designated wheelchair space is often occupied by passengers' luggage. He has to wait for one bus after another before there is space for him to board to go home. Fung once came across a bus driver who was rude enough to tell him, "I don't take passengers in wheelchairs," before driving away. Recalling all these grievances, Fung laughed bitterly and said he was used to it.

When he saw a competition related to social inclusion, Fung participated with a wild idea. He had never expected to succeed, but it gave him the funding and manpower to actualise his idea. The original idea was to create a barrier-free map mobile app to provide wheelchair users with information, including barrier-free facilities in shopping malls and barrier-free routes to shopping malls. The aim was to help wheelchair users integrate into the community and improve their quality of life. But Fung, who started the project with nothing but good intentions, found out that there were a lot of provisions to study after participating in the competition, and many copyright issues arose, while the fund was nearly exhausted halfway through. Even his teacher at school asked him to give up, because the app was nowhere near completion, and there was little room for development. The team morale hit a new low. "People in Hong Kong are concerned about money. They only care about how you operate and how you make money.

Many judges asked about our plans on sustaining the development, but no one cared about the benefits of the app or how many people it would be able to help.” To build an inclusive society, one cannot simply rely on an app or a software — support from the government and large organisations is essential. Wheelman’s database was built by wheelchair users and volunteers, who would call venues to inquire about the facilities and carry out field visits in person. So far, the app contains barrier-free information on more than 30 shopping malls in Hong Kong to help wheelchair users enjoy life.

shopping malls have hidden elevators which are difficult to find; some MTR stations only have one elevator, making it impossible to take the MTR when the elevator is in maintenance. The list of everyday inconveniences is endless. “The most important thing is to change the mindset of society. A step at an entrance would already be an obstacle for us. Some people think they can help carry us, but my electric wheelchair weighs more than a hundred kilograms so it’s difficult to lift.” Fung recalled his experience at a computer fair: a large company’s booth was slightly raised for no apparent reason but there was no ramp, so he could only watch from afar. To change the social atmosphere, educating the next generation is the first step. He told us that children on the street would often curiously point at his wheelchair and ask “What’s that?”, and their parents would look embarrassed. However, he thinks that situations like that are actually good opportunities to teach the next generation about respecting people with different needs. “You can simply tell them it’s a wheelchair, so that they know there are different people with different needs in the world. After all, it’s the attitude that counts.”

“I didn’t think about setting up a company or turning this into a business. If the aim becomes making money, it would go against my original intention. I just wanted to make life more convenient for myself and my friends. That’s why I think it is worth doing.”

Although in recent years, society has been advocating for the construction of barrier-free facilities, Fung pointed out sadly that it is usually done for the sake of doing. For example, most wheelchair seats in cinemas are in the first row, and no one would want to sit in the first row to watch films; some restaurants’ barrier-free toilets are unavailable because they are used as storage rooms; some

“ We were taught in school that Hong Kong has scarce land but a large population. A majority of policies and designs, therefore, try to accommodate the most facilities while taking up as little space as possible. While a planned city should cater to the different needs of different users, many places in Hong Kong have neglected the needs of wheelchair users. Many people with disabilities need to spend unnecessary time waiting, take detours, or simply choose to stay at home to avoid the hassle.

Lau Shiu Fung, also known as Fung, is a graduate of the Department of Computing of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). He designed Wheelman, a mobile application that provides barrier-free information, in the hope of giving people with disabilities more opportunities to utilise urban design and enjoy life.



Now that the mobile app has been launched, Fung feels relieved to have accomplished his goal. To him, Good Seed's funding and flexibility led to the turning point that allowed him to complete the project. Now, he can refine and add to the information in the app at his own pace. He has recently been collecting information on the accessibility of karaoke places, so that more wheelchair users can enjoy the entertainment facility.

"I think the most ideal state is not needing these apps anymore, with communities built with accessibility in mind to cater for everyone's needs."

Fung also pointed out that barrier-free facilities are not only beneficial to wheelchair users, but also to the elderly and parents with baby strollers.

A society always consists of people with different needs. Empathy is what allows us to bridge the differences.

(Note: The mobile app Wheelman is not in operation currently.)