Making a difference from where he sits

By JUDY SIEGEL-ITZKOVICH

Canadian athlete and pro-disabled activist Rick Hansen has no regrets; life in a wheelchair has been rich, challenging and rewarding, he says.

If Canadian Rick Hansen could turn back the clock to that day in 1972 when, hitchhiking on a pickup truck that swerved off a country road and crashed into the trees, his spinal cord snapped at waist level – he wouldn’t even try. “It was a long, hard journey. It took time to forgive myself for getting into the truck with my friend, and I was very angry at the driver. My parents went through a lot. But I regard that accident at age 15 as the best thing that could have happened to me. I would never trade my life that followed for something else.”

Almost without being aware of it, he gradually became a catalyst for change in society’s attitudes, and a man dedicated to making a difference.

Born in Port Alberni, British Columbia, Hansen grew up in Williams Lake, BC. By his teens he had won all-star awards in five sports. After the devastating injury, he turned his paralysis into a lifelong mission, promoting research into spinal cord injuries and accessibility and integration for the disabled around the world.

He remembers the accident vividly – even though 38 years have passed. “I was returning home from a fishing trip,” Hansen tells The Jerusalem Post in an interview in Jerusalem. “A friend of mine who was also 15 sat on the right side of the truck, with me on the left, but he asked to switch seats, which I did. The truck went carelessly to the right around a corner.

There were no seat belts. I was thrown against a steel tool box and my spinal cord was severed at the waist.”

Hansen worked to rehabilitate himself, finished high school and then became the first student with a physical disability to graduate in physical education from the University of British Columbia. He won national championships on wheelchair volleyball and wheelchair basketball teams and went on to become a world-class Paralympic athlete.

“My friend in the truck was only lightly hurt, but if he had been sitting on the right and been paralyzed, it would have been devastating, as he had never believed in himself. But after seeing what I could do with my life as a paraplegic, he devoted himself to playing acoustic guitar – and won a top prize.” Today, that friend – also 53 – works at the Rick Hansen Foundation, which its namesake established in 1997.
“Life is about passion and giving, surrounding yourself with love, having purpose and making a change in the world. I could do this without being able to walk,” says Hansen, looking healthy, fit, with the strong biceps he needed to push himself over 40,000 kilometers in 34 countries around the world – including Israel – a project he embarked upon in March 1985. He finished his Man in Motion World Tour “two years, two months and two days later” and was received as a hero in his hometown. Canadian songwriter David Foster wrote the original version of a song called Saint Elmo’s Fire (Man In Motion) in his honor.

Hansen used that amazing trip to increase awareness of the needs of the disabled, and raised $26 million for spinal injury research. Since then, his foundation has collected over $220 million more. He married Amanda Reid, the physiotherapist who accompanied him on that first tour; they have three daughters Emma, Alana, and Rebecca (aged 20, 18 and 15).

Another famous person with disabilities that Hansen knew was Christopher Reeve, the late Superman movie hero who became a quadraplegic after a fall from his horse. “He was a great man,” comments Hansen, who admired him for setting up a foundation to advance research in the field. Another hero of his is a former mayor of Vancouver, Sam Sullivan, who lost control of all four limbs in a skiing accident at 19, overcame depression and suicidal thoughts and went on to his election to city council in 1993 and in 2005 as mayor. “I remember that he went to Torino as mayor to attend the Paralympic Games. In his electric wheelchair, he circled the field with the country’s flag. He didn’t have to say a thing. He could have spent his life in a hospital, but he thrived."

These successes conflict with the image of disability in the minds of some people. “Occasionally, when we go to a restaurant, the waiter will bring the bill to my wife or an attendant at the airport will talk to her rather than to me – as if being unable to walk means I have no brain. I don’t know if it’s a sign of women’s liberation or my own situation,” Hansen says.

LAST WEEK, Hansen was back in Israel, having retraced part of that historic wheelchair-bound effort, but this time going to Australia, China, Bahrain, Jordan, Israel, Australia and the US. He aimed to use his time here to celebrate the country’s progress in providing a better life for disabled people, inspire Israelis to make a difference and strengthen cooperation between Israel and his native Canada in the area of spinal cord injury and accessibility.

As in 1985, he arrived here by pushing himself in his wheelchair over the Allenby Bridge. “I was very pleased to see Jordanian and Israeli officials at the border consulting each other and making arrangements while drinking sweet tea. It’s forbidden to cross the bridge unless you’re in a bus or car, but they made an exception for me,” says Hansen.

He brought the flame into the stadium in the 2010 Winter Olympics. At the opening ceremony for the 2010 Winter Paralympics, his story was shown on a huge wraparound screen before Hansen went onstage and spoke to the crowd.

Canada’s Rick Hansen Spinal Cord Injury Registry, established in 2003, is a unique, nationwide living database of information that serves as an invaluable resource for clinicians, researchers and healthcare administrators who want to better understand and improve specific spinal cord injury (SCI) treatments, practices and programs. It continually collects and analyzes data from more than 30 major hospitals and research institutions, and is a critical supporting platform for the Rick Hansen Institute’s Translational Research and best-Practice Implementation Programs.

The Israeli leg of Hansen’s worldwide tour was coordinated by the Canadian Friends of Hebrew University and Hebrew University’s Institute for Medical Research Israel-Canada (IMRIC). During his stay here, he launched a joint project in spinal cord research between his foundation and IMRIC.
The research project is aimed at improving health-care outcomes for people with SCI; reducing the incidence and severity of permanent paralysis from such injuries; improving physical function, and cutting the incidence and severity of secondary complications.

Injury registry sites will also be set up here to share data and pave the way for international clinical trials.

Hansen has received a huge number of awards and honors, including the Companion Order of Canada and the Order of British Columbia, an audience with the previous pope and honorary doctorates from a dozen universities; in June, he will be back with his wife to receive an honorary degree from Hebrew University during its 74th board of governors meeting.

“Israel has changed a lot,” says Hansen, “since my previous visit in 1985. There is tremendous development in the economic, scientific and medical fields, and more accessibility for the disabled. But because this is a country with many old buildings, retrofitting them to make them wheelchair accessible is slower. Much more can be done.”

He notes that as many of the Baby Boomer generation are getting older and still want to travel the world, including Israel, the country will have to think of ways to help them, so both Israeli and foreign disabled will benefit from improving accessibility.”

Even in Canada and the US, which have long had laws requiring the construction of building and infrastructure friendly to the disabled, “there is still a way to go.” Of Canada’s population of 30 million, about 4.8 million are disabled.

His native country has one of the most progressive charters; it says people with disabilities have to be included. “There are laws and building codes going back to the 1970s, and a growing awareness of the fact that if those with disabilities can study, learn a profession and work, they will not be living on welfare. They will be meaningfully employed and pay taxes. A person who is shifted from welfare to working at an average salary would be a net per-capita gain to the economy of $1 million over 30 years.”

He knows of no formal way to rate a country’s accessibility, but thinks it will be possible in the future.

“We will have a global conference in Vancouver in 2012 where we will discuss the issue.”

He hopes that a comprehensive, objective rating system will be established and formulated, like the ratings of hotels. A unique awards program, “Difference Makers,” will also be launched there to recognize people whose work has made a significant impact in accessibility, and for researchers who have made important advances in the field.

Hansen wants more public awareness of the need to integrate the disabled – not only paraplegics like himself but also the blind, hearing disabled, mentally disabled and others.

“If people could place photos of the disabled on a website and tell their human stories of accomplishment, it would improve their image,” he says.

Progress in research on molecular biology, neuroprotection and other scientific fields with an impact on spinal-cord damage is “incredibly exciting. We have learned that nerve axons can regrow. There are ways to protect a damaged spinal cord from dying, and exoskeletons that can be worn by paraplegics. We can standardize the language for measuring injury and outcomes, set up a registry of treatment centers and exchange data. Advances in treatment will be applied to patients quickly. I believe that eventually, wheelchairs will be exhibited in museums. I think it’s possible in a quarter of a century, or even less, for the paralyzed to walk again. For me, it would be a great celebration,” says Hansen.
People with disabilities who get depressed should remember that “there is always someone who cares. Talk to your peers. Find humor. Most of my days, I think about how grateful I am. Everybody – even those who can walk and see and hear – has some disability.”