Even though Adeodatus may have trouble speaking, he has no trouble expressing his gratitude while greeting visitors with a big smile as he grabs their hands to greet them.

The 14 year-old who lives in Masaka on the outskirts of the capital Kigali with his mother and two sisters spent the first 11 years of his life either in bed or crawling indoors because he didn't have a wheelchair.

With a condition as a result of a polio virus contracted when he was just two years, Adeodatus developed physical disability and could hardly walk or move his legs. Three years ago, he was among the luckiest to get a wheelchair from a local non-profit organisation.

Statistics from the National Council of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) indicate that, in 2019 there were over 2,500 children with disabilities that need wheelchairs in Rwanda.

Children with disabilities receive free wheelchairs in August 2019 from Angel Rider wheelchairs, the dōTERRA Healing Hands Foundation and Brent Andrus of Peace House

Children living with disabilities are one of the most marginalized groups in society; they face daily discrimination and have very limited access to educational opportunities. They also face other barriers which include: lack of accessible physical environments, transportation, and non-adapted means of communication.

To better the chances, Angel Rider Wheelchairs, a non-profit based in Kagugu, Kigali is redefining mobility for children by giving them free wheelchairs in different districts and provinces across the country.

Founded by Steven Bailey, and his wife along with a couple of friends from Utah, USA, the organisation builds, maintains and distributed hundreds of wheelchairs each year for impoverished children in Rwanda.

Steven Bailey, co-founder of Angel Rider Wheelchairs, a non-profit based in Kigali

After receiving the wheelchair, Adeoadatus' life has changed. "He has now got friends and receives support from them because he can now move around with

them and no longer the helpless boy," Adeoadatus' mother Honorine Niyonizera says.

"At one point, I almost felt ashamed; I decided to remain at home with him asking myself, why I had been given such a child. It was tough and straining to carry him around in public," explains Niyonizera, who was unsure where and how to get a wheelchair.

Luckily for Niyonizera, the NCPD had registered his boy with the non-profit in 2017 and the family received a wheelchair to ease his movement struggles.

Steven Baily observes that, "we want to give wheelchairs to these children to make it easy for them to go to school, get out of the house and make it easy for their parents and everybody concerned."

Amon Nkomeje, who lives in the same town of Masaka had no chance of almost going to school without any physical support until he was donated a wheelchair, notes his mother who expresses gratitude.

The mother points out that when Nkomeje was given a free wheelchair, started attending school, plays with other children and she is proud he learns well and his English has improved.

Nkomeje's multipurpose chair is fit for purpose, and has given him the ability to write and read. He is one of the most active boys in his class.

"I can now go anywhere I want, I now have many friends that help me to move around the school compound," he boasts.

Adeoadatus and Nkomeje are among the few that Angel Rider Wheelchairs helped get an easier mobility, the non-profit has donated more than 2,000 chairs since they started five years ago, including 400 in 2019 and 500 in 2020.

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Some of the fit for purpose wheelchairs for disabled children

Gloria Uwimana who suffers from Cerebral palsy (CP), a group of disorders that affects a person's ability to move and maintain balance as well as posture couldn't move for the last eight years, mostly remaining in bed and indoors.

The family is so happy that that her mobility is much easier since she received a wheelchair.

William Akami from Angel Rider Wheelchairs who manages and coordinates the project says that it's terrible for these children without wheelchairs they can't attend school much less go outside.

"You can imagine someone always in bed, indoors for like three years; they only come out when they're sick, but when they get a wheelchair they can play with others and go to school. It's like salvations," he points out.

Akami said they give free wheelchairs to poor families that can't afford to buy one; they coordinate with the National Council of Persons with Disabilities which provides a list of nominated children.

Emmanuel Ndayisaba, the Executive Secretary of NCPD notes that they have a network with all institutions supporting persons with disabilities in Rwanda which makes it easy to connect with families with special needs.

Still, before a family is handed a wheelchair, a physical therapist makes an evaluation to determine what kind is required.

Eric Habimana, a physical therapist and orthopaedic technologist indicates, "We assess the physical disability of every child before recommending the kind of wheelchair."

These fit and purpose wheelchairs are built at the Angel Rider Wheelchairs workshop in Kagugu by well-trained mechanics that ensures customized wheelchairs are made and easily fix or repair when they break down.

According to the non-profit, it takes about 2-3 days to make one standard wheelchair, though production capacity depends on the availability of materials.

The cost of making one standard wheelchair ranges between Rwf 80, 000 to Rwf 100,000, compared to the imported wheelchairs which go up to Rwf350,000 to Rwf 500,000.

To make the chairs, some of the parts which include axis, rims, spokes, hub and tires have to be imported while singled welded flames (fixed and affordable) on which the individual sits, are made out of steel angles and bars sourced from a local manufacturer.

To sustain the non-profit, Baileys, Andruses, and several others rely largely on donors who have contributed to the program. “I had a neighbour knock on the door and hand us a check for $10,000,” Bailey said. “We don’t have to ask people.”

He said they’ve raised $1 million and are not looking to raise more. “All the money goes to making the wheelchairs and their distribution.”

In Rwanda today, there are few low cost wheelchairs that are mostly imported but they tend to break quite easily because of the terrain and it’s very hard or even impossible for users to get them repaired and maintained locally because their parts are expensive to import.

Habimana notes that since some of the children living with the disabilities have disorders that affect a person’s ability to move and maintain balance as well as posture, they ensure that the wheelchairs design are strong and can at least last for over 25 years.

These wheelchairs are specially made to handle the rougher, rural terrain of the country and adjust in size as the child grows to allow for prolonged use. When a wheelchair is delivered, a team checks back in with the family to track progress and report results.

Making wheelchairs at a workshop facility in Kagugu, Kigali

Despite being a sigh of relief for the families, they always meet obstacles to maintain the wheelchairs, since some of the parts are imported while others are locally manufactured.

Immaculate Mungwasingizwe who lives in Kayonza with a daughter with a disability says that repairing and maintaining the broken manual wheelchair comes at a very high cost roughly Rwf 25,000 to Rwf 36,000 since it always involves buying spare parts like wheels; you need tools and equipment as well as workshop facilities.

“Some of the wheelchairs don’t meet the required transportation needs, and are

heavier. Since they’re manually propelled and less portable,” She adds.

Children living with disabilities that come from poor families continue to suffer from mobility constraints when they need to move long distances because the wheelchairs given to them are manual and need support from someone stronger.