

Udo's dream comes true

Brainstorm leads to a condo with heart for disabled

BY GEORGE GAMESTER
COLUMNIST

He is at the mercy of mosquitoes.

For they can bite him at will. Feast on his blood. And he cannot fight back.

Nor can he comb his hair. Turn a doorknob. Flick a light switch.

He cannot walk a step. And yet...

Udo Franz is mighty. In intellect. In battle. In heart. And most of all, in what he's done for some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Are we nominating this man for sainthood today? No way. Because he doesn't go for that stuff. "Cut the b.s.," Udo would say, "and get on with it."

So this is our story: How a severely disabled Torontonian made a \$35 million dream come true...

It begins one autumn evening at York University in 1984. Thirty-something Udo Franz, afflicted with muscular dystrophy since childhood, is waiting for the Wheel-Trans bus to get him home to his North York apartment.

He's a busy guy, Udo. But he's learned the value of patience. When you cannot grasp a spoon or brush your teeth without help, you learn you must depend on others who may keep you waiting.

Right now, the priority is education. Having endured high school in Acton, (where he was jounced to school every morning in the back of a milk truck), Udo has returned to the classroom after running his own small business for eight years.

Why? "I just felt I should do more with my life. Do something of value."

Now he's joined at the bus stop by another wheelchair student, Helen (Bobby) Sarlina. Udo and Bobby have killed a lot of time together, waiting for Wheel-Trans.

Conversation turns to the high cost and poor quality of personal services available to the disabled; to the problems of finding adequate housing with wheelchair access; and to the stultifying institutional atmosphere in the places they live.

"You know what we ought to do?" declares Udo. "Put up our own building, designed for our special needs — then bring in our own staff to help us."

"Yes," says Bobby. "That would be a dream."

A dream that was born that night in the heart and mind of Udo Franz. A dream inflated, debated, propagated, embel-



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

Gamester's People

lished and refined by seven other disabled York students who often get together with Udo while waiting for the Wheel-Trans bus.

After graduating with a degree in public policy administration that leads to a banking job, Udo stays in touch with the group from the bus stop, proposing they make a pitch to the Ontario government for a project which would combine housing and support services to the disabled, with tenants running the place.

But before it can make a presentation, the group needs a name.

"We just couldn't come up with one to satisfy everyone," recalls Udo. "Finally, I said: 'Geez, with all the brains here, you'd think we could think of something. Wait a minute. All the brains... Alde brains.'"

Thus is the Aldebrain Group born. Now the battle begins.

With our wheeler-dealer on wheels leading the fight, it takes six years of proposals, rejections, turmoil, politics, anguish and bureaucratic delays. Finally, in 1990, Bob Rae's NDP government guarantees \$35 million in bank loans for

design and construction.

And guess who's in charge? Zooming around the Scarborough site in his wheelchair and hard hat, Udo bugs the builders every step of the way to ensure every possible handicap-friendly amenity is installed — from extra-wide hallways (so two wheelchairs can pass) to drive-in bathroom showers.

Today, the 12-storey, 243-unit Aldebrain Tower at Lawrence Ave. E. and Birchmount Rd. is a state-of-the-art operation, accommodating 850 residents (speaking 20 languages) in a harmonious mix of able-bodied and physically disabled tenants living independently.

Operated on a non-profit basis by the tenants themselves, the atmosphere is non-institutional. The building looks and feels like a condo — with a heart. The chairman of the board of directors is Dom Fregele, one of the original Aldebrain Eight. The executive director is Udo Franz.

"Let me tell you about Udo," says Hedy Chandler of Community Head Injuries Resource Services, a government-funded organization that provides housing, care and treatment for

UDO'S PLACE: Udo Franz outside his dream come true — the 243-unit, state-of-the-art Aldebrain Tower at Lawrence Ave. E. and Birchmount.

severely brain-injured people.

"I wrote 438 letters to non-profit buildings, appealing for accommodation for our people.

"I received just one positive reply — from Aldebrain. We now have 20 people living there, with attendant care, close to their families.

"We've saved a fortune in tax dollars, and the quality of their lives has been increased enormously — thanks to a man who had a dream.

"He sits in a wheelchair. But to me, this man is 10 feet tall."

You said it, Hedy. A lot of us must look up to Udo Franz.

LET'S TALK: Do you have a story to share about an unforgettable person or incident that has somehow touched, changed or enriched your life? Call 416-869-4874 any time. Or write to me at *Gamester's People*, George Gamester, Toronto Star, One Yonge St., Toronto, Ont., M5E 1E6. Fax: 869-4322. E-mail: ggamest@thestar.ca