

COMMUNITY NEWS

R.A.M.P.S (Ramp Access Made Possible by Students) *Students Install Wheelchair Ramps for Seniors and Disabled*

"It's just wonderful," exclaimed Mr. Braithwaite of his new wheelchair ramp, recently assembled by a Collegiate High School team from RAMPS. "Now I don't have to worry that my sister will dump me into the bushes," he smiles widely at his house-mate and sister, Eleanor, and his caregiver, Penny Allen. While his tone is light, that concern was one that caused him to grip tightly to the arms of his wheelchair in January's pre-dawn dark and cold of 5:00a.m. His sister would tentatively and gently lower his wheelchair off a sidewalk, then struggle to push him over the defeated-looking pansies through the frost and mulch-covered flower bed to maneuver around the steps at his apartment complex, and on to his dialysis appointment. Mr. Braithwaite is one of six wheelchair-bound disabled individuals in the Richmond area who recently received new modular wheelchair ramps from RAMPS.

Collegiate High School students who assembled Mr. Braithwaite's ramp met several days before the weekend during their "free time" at school to review the weather report and ramp recipient information for the upcoming weekend. "The high will be 32 degrees on Sunday, are you guys up for building ramps in that kind of weather?" Susan Revere, the RAMPS Executive Director warned. The club members looked at each other and grinned. "Bring it on!" said Mike Van Reekum, one of the club's recently elected officers. Out on the job site and working in the shadow of the apartment building in then 28 degree weather, club secretary Annie Piland helped to keep the group motivated, "Someone hand me some more washers, let's keep moving!" The club's co-presidents, Jess Hawthorne and Clay Timmons, supported her efforts, making sure no one was just

standing around. This "let's get it done attitude" is the strength behind RAMPS.

RAMPS is a non-profit organization formed in 2005 by three Collegiate juniors -Coleman Wortham, Mike Dowd and Gray Fain. The goal of the organization is to pay for and assemble wheelchair ramps for the elderly and disabled wheelchair bound individuals with limited financial resources. From a trio of high school students challenged to contribute to their community through charitable projects, the program has grown exponentially.

The modular ramps installed by the students are hardened steel, designed to shed water and snow more quickly than traditional ramps. The average cost is \$2500 per ramp, varying in price due to the length and complexity of the design required. Each student group raises \$600 for each ramp they build. This expectation ensures each student develops organizational and presentation skills as well as investing in the program's success.

Ms. Revere is responsible for securing additional funding for the balance of the ramp costs. In order to build ramps as economically as possible, the RAMPS organization has developed a close working relationship with a national ramp manufacturer to ensure a discounted rate for each ramp.

Ramp recipients are pre-qualified as to their personal and financial needs as defined by ElderHomes, Inc. and Senior Connections, The Capital Area Agency on Aging, two local non-profit groups providing services for seniors. Younger people are also in need of wheelchair ramps. Local City and County Social Services departments provide information for youth and middle-aged potential recipients.

Within the first year of its inception and installation of their first ramp in

August 2005, the club was profiled on NBC 12 "Call 12" segment. This exposure led to numerous leads to build new ramps, as well as increased community support, as local businesses donated funds to support the Club's efforts. Since then, 44 more ramps have been donated and built by RAMPS, with additional support from businesses, community organization and family foundations. As the organization continues to grow in size and strength in the metro Richmond area, RAMPS has branched out to nearby regions.

In addition to improving the quality of life for elderly and disabled wheelchair-bound individuals, RAMPS makes a significant economic impact on the community. By helping these people stay in their homes longer, RAMPS reduces the housing cost of recipients who otherwise might have been moved to Medicare or Medicaid-funded facilities.

Currently, RAMPS works with local organizations such as ElderHomes to identify qualifying individuals who have requested a ramp. If you know someone who needs a wheelchair ramp and cannot afford one, please contact RAMPS at 804-282-3605. For additional information about RAMPS, or to make a donation to help an elderly or disabled person in the Richmond area, please visit us on our web site at www.rampsbystudents.org, or send a tax-deductible donation to: RAMPS, 1606 Santa Rosa Road, Suite 136, Richmond, VA 23229.