



When One Door Opens

Increasing Accessibility and Awareness in Austin

By Mark Ray

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When is a door not a door? When it's a barrier.

That was the situation Eagle Scout Archer Hadley faced for three years at Stephen F. Austin High School in Austin, Texas. Archer, who uses a power wheelchair due to cerebral palsy, had to rely on other people to open the school's manual doors for him. One day last spring, he got caught in the rain while waiting for help and wondered, "Why can't I do something about this?"

Doing something became his senior capstone project in the school's Academy for Global Studies program. After getting approval from school officials, he worked with the Austin Independent School District to develop a plan to retrofit five entrances. The projected cost was \$40,000, all of which he would have to raise.

Last October, Archer launched the Mr. Maroo Wheelchair Challenge (named after the school's mascot). For several weeks, students and teachers paid \$20 to challenge each other to spend a day in a wheelchair—or \$20 to turn down a challenge. That effort raised about \$3,000 and earned Archer plenty of time media attention. Thanks to his media appearances and a letter-writing campaign, Archer raised \$87,000, more than double his original goal, by the end of the semester. "We got hundreds of checks in the mail, donations ranging from \$5 or \$10 to a donation of \$20,000," he says. "Before you knew it, we had more money than we knew what to do with."

In fact, Archer raised so much money that he paid for an awning and an improved wheelchair ramp at Austin High School and five automatic doors at Crockett High School. And he's not done yet. He plans to help 12 more schools over the next two years.

Archer credits his Eagle Scout project—harvesting 60,000 Texas elm seeds for three global seed banks—with preparing him for success. “The key to a good service project in my opinion is having the leadership skills to disseminate the path to people that are on your team and people in the community to help you so you’re not physically doing the project alone,” he says. “That was really key with this project, too.”

Besides exceeding his original target, Archer also achieved another important goal. “I’ve learned that the main purpose was to create an authentic experience for the participants of the Wheelchair Challenge so they can take on a new perspective of life and understand the world in a different way,” he says. “I think we’re beginning to accomplish that.”

Now a freshman at The University of Texas at Austin, he’s already planning to replicate the Wheelchair Challenge on campus. He’s also looking forward to raising more money for worthy causes—and perhaps following his grandfather, Bill Archer, into the U.S. House of Representatives.

Archer’s project at Austin High School was dedicated on January 5, 2015, just in time for the spring semester to start. Among the VIPs in attendance was Governor Greg Abbott, himself a wheelchair user. Abbott spoke for many when he said, “Anyone with heart, anyone with determination, anyone with a focus on achieving anything can achieve things beyond their wildest dreams,” he said. “Archer is an inspiration ... an inspiration for me, an inspiration for so many others. “

When is a door not a door? When it’s a portal to a better future for all.