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The Wheelchair Runaround: Oh, the Bitter Irony

by Sharon Berry-Brown

A durable medical equipment vendor in Northern Virginia recently got to see a side of me rarely seen.

I am non-confrontational by nature. I was voted "Best Friend" by my 4th grade class. But if you try to dupe me or in some other way wind up on my doo-doo list, you will be rebuked. And if you try any of the above AND it involves my kids, well...you've been warned.



All they had to do was replace a knob on the back of Isaiah's pediatric wheelchair (his "extreme stroller"). The knob attaches to the screw that attaches to the bar that keeps the seat upright or reclined. And keeps it street legal for bus use. They gave us a temporary, workable solution back in the spring. Told us the part would be available in two weeks. That was in March. What we've experienced has been a lot of empty promises, countless minutes waiting on hold, and a serious lack of decent customer service.

All I wanted was straight answers.

It wasn't all about the knob. Well, not entirely. It was about a company, who provides equipment to individuals who very often can't speak for themselves--clients whose very day-to-day existence depends on the care and consideration of others--doing the right thing.

My son can walk, but he's not a safe walker, physically or cognitively. He uses his wheelchair EVERY SINGLE DAY. He uses it on the school bus during the regular school year, and more recently, during the summer session. We depend on it. If it's not 100% in any capacity, that affects us all.

You would think a business that provides those services would realize that.

And for the most part, I have found they do. We've had nothing but positive DME experiences up to this point. I know it's not an industry-wide problem. Someone dropped the ball in our particular case...the original tech who evaluated the chair and was supposed to put the order in for the part is "no longer with the company." But I'm not going to give them the chance to drop it again. There are too many other companies out there who take pride in what they do. Who understand our daily struggles. Who see the worth of their work and what it means to families like ours.

The representative I dealt with did call me back to apologize. Earlier, my husband and I had inadvertently slipped into our Good Cop/Bad Cop routine on speakerphone. Can you guess who I was? I refrained from rolling my neck and sucking my teeth, but I didn't mince words. And for a moment, I thought it had worked. He promised to have the parts in a week's time at no charge.

I should have known better.

After our conversation, I immediately contacted Isaiah's pediatrics case manager. She followed up with a call to the company since she was less than impressed with their answers and the amount of time it had already taken. Apparently, she didn't appreciate getting the runaround any more than we did. So, Team Isaiah decided to take our ball and go home. She put us in contact with a different DME. The new company seemed genuinely concerned about our situation. They were courteous, punctual, and polite. How refreshing!

Just when I was beginning to think we'd never see a new knob, they were able to get one. Of course it was the wrong size. That's OK--we got farther with them than we ever did with the other company. More than that, they have been tenacious about making it right. And in my Special Needs Universe, that's worth way more than a knob.

But having a new knob would be nice. Tenacity doesn't recline.

Sharon Berry-Brown is a 38-year-old stay-at-home mom currently residing in the Washington, D.C. area. She has a BS in psychology, which comes in handy as she and her husband rear their three children: two girls and their little brother, who refuses to let cerebral palsy slow him down. When she's not bulldogging for her kids, Sharon is blogging about them at www.threechocolatebrownies.blogspot.com