On a hot July afternoon, 23-year-old Nicholas Kaasa travels down Broadway in his power wheelchair. The chair is a machine to behold, tank-like, with three gray wheels on each side. It's outfitted with headlights and red circular taillights, along with orange hazard lights that flash when needed.

With the push of a button, Kaasa can go vertical: A hydraulic seat lift raises him half a foot from the chair's base. On the left side is attached a black leather, metal-studded saddlebag of the kind more often found on a Harley; it has a Seattle Seahawks logo and silver letters that spell "ICK." "I should probably find that 'N,'" Kaasa says.

Kaasa — who has cerebral palsy and vision impairment — cannot walk and uses the wheelchair to get around. When I ask him how fast it can go, he responds: "You want to check that?" And then he's gone, shooting down the sidewalk at warp speed. His answer when I catch up: "Fast."

"In Germany, it's street legal," Kaasa adds with a smirk.

For all its awesomeness, the wheelchair does have its problems. Sometimes it breaks down; sometimes the battery doesn't charge. But Kaasa's biggest complaint is that when people see him, they tend only to notice the chair and the disability it accommodates. They only see how his left arm curls just slightly against his body, how his legs are held tight with black pads. They don't really notice Kaasa, a big guy with a big personality whose nickname is "The House," a play on his last name.

Kaasa works as a community outreach advocate at Full Access, a Eugene nonprofit serving people with disabilities, and it's easy to see how he connects with others. He speaks like he's in a hurry, his mouth trying to keep up with his brain. He's a toastmaster member and quick with a comeback.

In his free time, Kaasa likes to write poetry. He has a thin black moustache and a wisp of a goatee. A tattoo of a bald eagle swooping down on a rainbow trout adorns his left upper arm, a tribute to his grandfathers. He's got vague plans for a full sleeve on his right arm, maybe a skeleton hand creeping down. He's not sure yet.

Kaasa is trying to educate the public as part of "Look Me in the Eye," a Eugene-based disability awareness campaign now in its seventh year. Made up of clients and advocates from Full Access and Oregon Supported Living Program (OSLP), a nonprofit residential, vocational and supported living program with an emphasis on arts, the campaign aims to develop relationships between people with disabilities and others using the seemingly simplest of acts: eye contact.


Gretchen Dubie


April Wick

Kaasa, like anyone with a disability, has his war stories. One time when he was downtown, a man asked if Kaasa would trade him his chair for a burrito. Sometimes people try to pray over him. Other people are well-intentioned but obnoxious, saying: "Must be fun riding around in that chair all day!"

Once, at a café, a woman put a dollar in his wheelchair's cup holder, thinking he was begging for money. Kaasa laughs. "I'm in this $40,000 chair, but can you give me a dollar?"

Amelia Abel, a woman with Down syndrome, was speaking before members of the Lions Club when a man stood up and admitted to being uncomfortable around people with disabilities. He said, 'I don't know where to begin with people like you.' Abel responded, 'Well, you can start by looking me in the eye.'

Most often, service people will ask his able-bodied friend what Kaasa wants, assuming he cannot speak for himself. Or they speak to him as if he were a child: A waitress at Olive Garden took his friend's order normally, but when she got to Kaasa, she bent down and made her voice Mickey-Mouse high: "What … would you-ooo … like today?!" Kaasa, without hesitation, squeaked back: "I … would like … the lasagnaaaa!"

But the most common microaggression is how people look at him, or don't. He says they either stare or pretend he's not even there. "People with disabilities may use a chair, but it's people first," he says. "People are just seeing the chair."

Kaasa definitely wants you to notice the rest of him, and it starts with looking him in the eye.

Broken Limb of Discomfort

According to Gretchen Dubie, executive director of OSLP, Look Me in the Eye began in 2009, when OSLP and Full Access were trying to raise money for an elevator (they share a building). Amelia Abel, a woman with Down syndrome, was speaking before members of the Lions Club when a man stood up and admitted to being uncomfortable around people with disabilities. He said, "I don't know where to begin with people like you." Abel responded, "Well, you can start by looking me in the eye."

Dubie knew right away the phrase "had legs," she says, and started working with employees and activists at both agencies to develop a fully fledged awareness campaign complete with a compelling eye-and-heart logo, television and social media commercials, school and community presentations, and lots of swag (T-shirts, wrist bands and even temporary tattoos).

The phrase has served as a rallying cry for the hundreds of people served by Full Access and OSLP. Since its inception, the campaign has been met with a solid community response. September has received official proclamation as "Look Me in the Eye" month by several cities, including Springfield all the way down to Roseburg and Coos Bay, though Eugene is the only city to proclaim it for all of 2016. The activists would like to spread the campaign not just around Oregon, but also around the country.

Seven years in, the aim of the campaign remains the same: to combat that discomfort first mentioned during Abel's Lions Club talk.

"What we have discovered is that people are uncomfortable, and with their own discomfort comes awkward interactions," Dubie says. Such awkwardness includes avoidant behavior like ignoring the person or aggressive behavior like insisting on opening a door. And the awkwardness is not just for the able-bodied person trying to interact, but also for the disabled person.

"It's closing people [with disabilities] off to wanting to educate or advocate or even interact with the community," Dubie says. "It's a two-way limb of discomfort and it just snaps in the middle of one interaction."

Dubie says that it's OK to ask questions like, "What happened to you? Can you hear me OK? Do you want me to hold the door for you?" Those social interactions start, she says, by making eye contact. "That's the starting point to interpersonal relationships," she says.

She is quick to point out that some people with disabilities don't like to be looked at in the eye, such as people on the autism spectrum. It is more about the quality of attention, Dubie says.

But can just the simple act of eye contact change the way people interact with disabled individuals? April Wick, executive director of Full Access who also has spina bifida and uses a wheelchair, says she believes looking someone in the eye can be a powerful political act. "If you are a student with a disability and your teacher is dismissing you or you are feeling broken and like no one is paying attention to you, you can assert: I am a human being. I want you to look at me. I want you to see me."

Looking at someone in the eye, particularly someone with a disability, is the beginning of truly seeing the rest of them. "We want to be seen in the fullness of our lives the way we see ourselves," Wick says.


Amelia Abel