

## **The View from Here**

**By: Justine Chichester**

The last time I drove a car was September 20, 2014. I remember that day like it was yesterday, and yet with everything that's happened over the past couple of years, it seems like a lifetime ago. Of all the things my injury has taken from me, my ability to walk, to stand, to dance; one of the things I miss the most is driving. I miss the days when I could just hop in my car and get to wherever I wanted to go, whenever I wanted to go there.

Now I sit and wait. And I have for a long time. I have to rely on family and friends to get around when I need to go somewhere. As much independence as I am gaining everyday, getting my strength back in physical therapy, and regaining the ability to take a few steps, not being able to drive still leaves me very dependent on others around me.

I was so excited when I heard about the Advanced Driver Rehabilitation program. I thought that because I had lost the use of my right leg, I had lost the ability to drive all together. But I learned this couldn't be further from the truth. Through the use of hand controls, many people living with disabilities drive themselves every single day. Now, I would be one of them. It was like a light bulb went off. I did all of my research and I called to schedule my appointment for an evaluation. I told my family members, friends and anyone who would listen, how excited I was to be taking yet another step towards getting my independence back. I would be driving again.

After much anticipation, the day finally arrived. I took the initial test, passed the evaluation and the time had come to start my training. I was going to be behind the wheel of a car again for the first time in almost three years. As I transferred from my wheelchair into the car, I was finally behind the wheel, ready to drive and I was truly ecstatic. I sat in the driver's seat and learned how to fold my legs back and how to steer the car using the hand controls on the steering wheel. As we sat in the car in my driveway, I cheered with glee during that first lesson just envisioning the prospect this newfound freedom would bring me.

With my instructor in the passenger seat, I started the car and began to steer out of the driveway using the hand controls to accelerate and to brake. It was very different and very slow at first. I drove down the street in front of my house and around the block. I was surprised at how I was suddenly flooded with the memories of what my life used to be. How I used to drive to work, drive to dinner, to the grocery store, drive to meet friends. I had forgotten what it felt like. Being behind the wheel once again brought back all of these memories of my life before my injury. I could not have anticipated how emotional this new step would be.

As I drove the car around the block for the first time in years, I had to adjust to how different this drive and this future would really be for me. It felt different and it certainly looked different, but in the end, the most important thing is that I was not only regaining the ability to drive my own car again, I was reclaiming the independence I once had and lost for so many years.