

Padding Toward Inclusion: Florida Nonprofit Expands Access For People With Disabilities

By Michaela Galligan

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A team of people canoeing together on Lake Aurora, with Bill Redmon directing from the back.

Removing the Barriers Initiatives are making waves in developing inclusivity and accessibility across the state of Florida, both figuratively and literally. The Central Florida-based nonprofit has been working to ensure those with physical disabilities aren't prevented from enjoying many of the things others can. How was this project started? Surprisingly, with canoes.

Bill Redmon founded Removing the Barriers after observing a lack of inclusivity in the areas around him for those with physical disabilities. The retired pastor and business director sought to make a difference in these people's lives and found just the way to do that.

Redmon started Wild Creek Adventures in 2007, a company that encourages team-building exercises in 14-person canoes. The company worked with many corporate organizations and teams to resolve communication and cooperation issues, taking it out of the office and onto the water.

"The canoes are a great way to encourage teamwork," said Redmon. "There's no pretending to get along on the water, and communication flows naturally."

The project stayed active for several years till Redmon set his sights on helping those in need of accessibility.

“I’ve always had an interest in the underdog,” said Redmon. “I’ve seen the lack of accessibility and wanted to support them.”



Two canoes seen on the bank of Lake Aurora.

Redmon and his team began the initiative by providing accessible golf carts and other transportation for camps in Lake Aurora. Since then, these materials have been moved across the state, providing access for inclusion anywhere possible, from Central Florida to Tallahassee.

With the formerly operational Wild Creek Adventures in mind, Removing the Barriers has also hosted and organized accessible events on the water. Those with physical disabilities can get into canoes and participate in activities.

Recently, Removing the Barriers sponsored this year’s Ms. Wheelchair Florida, Schuyler Arakawa, in her fundraising goal of getting to the national competition in Michigan this August. The event was planned to have Arakawa in a canoe with others paddling on the Alafia River in Brandon. While the paddling of the event was postponed due to rain, the fundraising was still successful, and the paddling will be rescheduled later in July.

Removing the Barriers also has big plans for the future, including Stirring Waters, an accessible and inclusive water park. The park is still in the early stages of development but holds the goal of opening in Central Florida in the coming years.

More information can be found on its website at <https://removingthebarriers.org/>.