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Ramp up to better life

'Sisters' gain independence

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By [RYAN PAGELOW](mailto:rpagelow@scn1.com) rpagelow@scn1.com

Stephanie DeVost and Shavon Knox share so many things that people who know them call them twins. They're both 25 years old, are best friends and live together as sisters with Stephanie's mom, Valerie, a 3rd Ward alderman in North Chicago.

Stephanie and Shavon also share disabilities that limit their ability to walk, which has made it difficult for them to go up and down the steps to get into their home. That changed this week when a Waukegan law firm donated \$5,000 to build a wooden wheelchair ramp for the women through Ramp Up, an organization affiliated with United Cerebral Palsy.

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Stephanie DeVost (left), Valerie DeVost and Shavon Knox pose at the top of the new wheelchair ramp at their home in North Chicago.

(Josh Peckler/Special to the News-Sun)

"I love it. I can't stay off it," said Stephanie, who was born with cerebral palsy.

Shavon has Charcot-Marie-Tooth Disorder, which causes people to lose normal use of their legs and arms.

Previously, Stephanie and Shavon would park their power wheelchairs in the garage and use a walker to walk to the back door, where they would work their way up the steps by holding on to whatever they could. It took them awhile, and occasionally they fell. The short trip was especially difficult in winter. Their chairs would get stuck on the snow and ice. Sometimes their mom would have to carry them into the house on her back.

"It's a lot easier for my mom now," Shavon said.

For Valerie, who is a single mother working for Metra, the cost of a ramp or wheelchair lift for the house was a little too much to purchase on her own, considering she had saved up for the girls' power wheelchairs about eight months ago.

"This is a blessing," she said about the donation for the ramp. "Knowing all the struggles they have to face, we thank God for this."

The Waukegan law firm of Salvi, Schostok and Pritchard has sponsored events for United Cerebral Palsy in the past and wanted to help build a ramp for a local family, said T.J. Saye of Lake Villa, the chief administrative officer for the law firm.

The law firm was matched to the DeVost family through La Voz Latina, an outreach rehabilitation program in Waukegan, and Ramp Up, which is based in Tinley Park. Ramp Up hired a contractor to build a 42-foot-long ramp on the side of the DeVost house for about \$8,000. Generally, ramps have one foot in length for every inch in height. Ramp Up also installed handle bars in the bathroom and improved the transition strips between rooms to make it easier to use a wheelchair inside the house.

Ramp Up works on about 40 to 50 projects a year through donations and grants, mostly focusing on low- to moderate-income families and veterans, said Ken Burr, a coordinator for Ramp Up.

"It makes a tremendous difference to the caregiver," he said.

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During the week, a bus picks up Stephanie and Shavon and takes them to Lakeside Center for the Disabled in Waukegan, where they earn a stipend working on projects for companies. On Fridays, they attend the Center for Independent Living in Mundelein to learn how to do things on their own and train for clerical jobs.

They became friends at Lakeside Center about five years ago and have been inseparable since then.

"They call us 'twins' at work," Shavon said.

"The Doublemint Twins," Stephanie added

They often complete each other's sentences. Shavon moved in with the DeVost family about 2½ years ago after her foster home wasn't working out for her. Valerie is working on adopting her.

"Stephanie not only has a friend, she has a sister," Valerie said. "I think this was a bond formed by angels."

Additional images from the DeVost home modification (provided by UCP)

