

Rolling Right Along with Kris Lenzo

By Vicki Wilson

Kris and Olivia Lenzo are flying. That's the only way to explain their heart-stopping careen down the incline of their local park. Kris, Olivia's dad, holds his 2-year-old daughter in his lap as his wheelchair picks up speed and Olivia shrieks, "Do I can't stop!"

Kris' wheelchair doesn't just come in handy as an impromptu thrill ride. It takes the two of them to the tot lot, the public pool, the local library and everywhere else in their hometown of Oak Park.

"I can't change the light bulbs on the ceiling, but that's because my wife didn't want to move the ladder," Kris jokes. He also admits that deep water swimming lessons for toddlers are tough. "I can keep myself afloat, or hold onto her, but not both," he says.

Kris has been living without his legs for almost half his life. After his legs

were crushed in a cardboard compactor ("People either say 'wow' or 'ouch,'" he says), they were both amputated.

"What happened, happened," Kris says. "I can't change that. I can really only focus on what I can do now.

"Compared to a lot of people, I was pretty well off, I found out I could do most of the things I wanted to do. I thought I wouldn't be able to play sports, but I do."

He certainly does. Kris competes with the Chicago Wheelchair Bulls, and has also participated in several 150-mile bicycle rides on his hand cycle.

Wherever he goes, he attracts attention. Sometimes, it's media attention – such as when he made the front page of the Detroit Free Press during one of his bike rides with his two daughters from his first marriage, 15-year-old Lizi and 13-year-old Hannah.

Other times, it's just the natural curiosity of regular folks, especially kids. He doesn't mind answering people's questions. "I'm unusual," he says.

"A kid [in the sand at the playground] asked,

'Where are your legs?' I said, 'Lost them in an accident.' He said, 'No you didn't. They're buried in the sand.'" Kris boosted up on his seriously developed arms, and swung there long enough to show the boy he was telling the truth.

Having a dad in a wheelchair is completely normal for Kris' daughters. Kris remembers when Lizi truly realized her dad was different. She was about 3 years old, and a little boy came over to play. Lizi was shocked when the boy urinated standing up.

When she questioned her mother, she replied, "That's what boys do."

"Dad doesn't," Lizi replied.

"Well, Dad doesn't have legs," her mother answered. It seemed to be the first time that Lizi noticed that her dad was in any way different from other dads.

"Her mother told her the story about how my legs were crushed in a machine," Kris recalls. "When I got home, Lizi rushed over to me and said, 'I'm so sorry you lost your legs in that washing machine, but it's okay, because you can scoot, and you can use your chair, and you can carry me in your lap.'"

And scoot he does. Olivia wants to swing? Kris hops out of the chair and scoots over to the playground swing set, where his aforementioned biceps are more than strong enough for some power pushes. Then they head to Barbara's Bookstore, where Kris hops out of his chair, clambers up the three steps to the children's area, and reads to Olivia.

All the girls are experienced lap riders. "I always carried the kids on my lap. It gives them good balancing skills," he says. "From the time they're 6 or 8 months old, they can ride up there pretty easily. When a kid gets tired, I can just put them on my lap. Sometimes I don't even bring a stroller."

The girls are proud of what their dad can do in his wheelchair. He recalls a time when Natalie, his 7-year-old stepdaughter, told a friend, "You should see Kris do tricky things with his chair."

The Lenzo girls get plenty of time with Kris because he's an at-home dad. His older daughters live with their mom, but Kris is the primary caregiver for Olivia and Natalie. Their mom, Sheri, works as a physical therapist. In the past, Kris sold wheelchairs and customized accessories for people with physical

disabilities.

Kris says he and Sheri agreed that he would be the parent to stay at

home after Olivia was born. Kris also takes care of a lot of the household chores. He goes grocery shopping in a specially outfitted minivan, does as much laundry as Sheri will allow, and handles the cooking.

Although he doesn't let his handicap hold him back, he admits some things can be a drag. It's hard to get around in the snow, although he sometimes has access to a power chair that allows him to pull his kids on a sled. And, since he lives in Oak Park, he sometimes has to deal with older buildings that aren't accessible.

"It's frustrating to see a new building with two stairs at the entrance. Why not just make it flat? I can get in, but what about people with a more intensive disability?"

Kris doesn't mind when people offer to assist him, though he prefers if they ask before assuming he needs help. But he's careful not to be rude to people who don't, recalling the words of a friend with a more severe disability.

"He told me, 'If you're rude to people who offer help, then they won't offer me help when I need it,'" Kris explains.

Kris credits his disability with bringing him together with his wife. "I did an in-service at the school [where she worked as a physical therapist]. A student challenged Sheri and her assistant to a game of wheelchair basketball, [with me as his teammate]. We crushed them in two games.

"She had never asked a man out in her life, but she asked me. The kid still takes credit for [getting us together]. We get together with him whenever he's in town."

So if you're ever in Oak Park, be on the lookout for Kris and Olivia. But be careful if you're on a hill, because they really can't stop!

Vicki Wilson is the features editor of the Wednesday Journal and a regular contributor to Chicago Parent magazine.