

## Chelmsford's Franklin Radgowski is an Advocate for Friends & Neighbors with Disabilities



**CHELMSFORD:** When Franklin Radgowski saw that the entrance to his church was not accessible to people with disabilities, he took action—not only for himself, but also for his neighbor's son. The 42-year-old Radgowski, who likes to be called Frankie, uses a wheelchair and so does his friend's young son.

“My friend is in a wheelchair and (before the ramp was there) his Dad was lifting him up and down the stairs. I was also using the stairs with a 200-pound wheelchair. We used a portable ramp over the stairs and I rode up and down the stairs which I don't think is safe,” Frankie said recalling the situation in 2022. He called it “an accident waiting to happen.” But once Frankie started speaking up about how the church needed an ADA-accessible ramp, he said, church leaders listened. “The process began right away once I brought it to their attention,” he said. “The squeaky wheel gets the oil.”

"Securing the church ramp is just one example of how Frankie continues to make a difference in the lives of others," said Christopher Starnes of The Edinburg Center in Bedford, a nonprofit agency that serves persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, co-occurring disorders, autism and brain injuries. Frankie has cerebral palsy. “[Frankie] has a history of advocacy work for his community in Chelmsford,” said Starnes, who met Frankie through Edinburg's Meaningful Whole Life (MWL) program—Edinburg's new twist on traditional day services for people with disabilities. Frankie lives at a group home operated by Edinburg, and takes part in MWL during the day. Starnes is a counselor assigned to Frankie as his “champion,” helping him work towards his personal goals.

Frankie has lived with his housemates at the Edinburg house in Chelmsford for over three years. During that time, he has become a member of the Chelmsford Commission for Disabilities. Recently, he went to a Town Meeting and spoke against building a hauling site for trucks, at Mill Street and Turnpike Road, which is near another group home. He and his neighbors successfully stopped the initiative.

“Just by nature, he is an advocate,” said Lori Harrington, team lead for the

Meaningful Whole Life Team program at The Edinburg Center. “He is happy at this group home; it is a small family for him. He is friendly and outgoing.”

“I like that I have 24/7 care, I get to go out in the community and hang around cool people. I just like to mingle and be [myself] and interact with people,” Frankie said. “Let the world know, ‘I’m Frankie and this is my disability.’”

Harrington, who has been helping Frankie assemble his autobiography, believes his outgoing, get-it-done approach has set a great example for other residents at the group home. “We talk about speaking up for yourself. You deserve to be heard as much as anyone,” she said. “We encourage people to see themselves as a wonderful person.”

When asked about his civic involvement, Frankie admits he has always been “the kind of person who likes to get involved,” adding, “I’m just advocating for people that can’t do it themselves,” he said. His advocacy work is also aimed at creating greater understanding and respect from the public regarding people with disabilities. Even as he encourages people to advocate for themselves, he also recognizes that people need to come together to help one another. “It’s not difficult,” he said. “People don’t take the time... Think if that was you, how would that make you feel? That’s what I always tell people. Think about how you would feel if you were in that person’s position.”

During Disability Awareness Month in March, Frankie was a guest speaker at The Edinburg Center’s main office in Bedford. “I talked about my disability and my book and what I had done for the church and I feel really happy for myself,” he said.

Having successfully secured the new ramp at his church, Frankie is setting his sights on helping Chelmsford improve its ADA-accessible sidewalks and crossings. “People rely on [me] to do that. At the end of the day, I feel really good when I do something like this. I like making a big difference for anybody that is in need of help,” Frankie said.