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“What you see in Disaboom is a lot of pride. The emphasis is on the ‘abled,’ not the ‘dis.’”
Alice Krueger of Centennial

Website anything but shy about dismantling disability stereotypes

By Karen Rouse The Denver Post

GREENWOOD VILLAGE >> It is hard not to stare at the attractive man in the online ad talking flirtatiously about his love life. He is shirtless, toned, tattooed – and in a wheelchair.

“Did my accident paralyze my sex drive?” he asks unapologetically.

It is an image of the disabled so rarely seen in mainstream media it is as startling as it is refreshing, just the way the founders of Colorado-based Disaboom Inc. like it.

The “boom” in “disaboom” is about “blowing up the previous perceptions of what a disability means,” said Dr. J. Glen House, a Colorado Springs physician and quadriplegic who founded disaboom.com with businessman J.W. Roth.

“That ad is unusual, but that’s Disaboom,” House said.

The site went live Oct. 1 and targets an estimated 54 million Americans with disabilities or “functional limitations,” from spinal-cord injuries to arthritis, said Roth, who is company chief executive and chairman.

Provocative ads for Disaboom have been

flooding websites for mainstream companies such as CNN, The New York Times and Fox News since November, featuring models, athletes, entertainers and others living with disabilities. Denver comedian Josh Blue, who has cerebral palsy and was the winner of NBC’s reality show “Last Comic Standing” in 2006, is a spokesman for the site.

Roth said the company is advertising to a broader audience because he and House believe “everyone in some way is touched by disability.”

On Disaboom, users can get specific information about conditions from specialists; read articles on sensitive issues such as dating and intimacy; talk sports; review books; movies and hotels; create MySpace-like profiles; blog; and participate in discussion groups.

Alice Krueger, a 58-year-old Centennial woman with multiple sclerosis, calls Disaboom “the 300-pound gorilla in the room” among other websites.

“There are sites that have existed for quite a while for individual disabilities,” said Krueger, who participates in medical forums on the site. “What Disaboom does is draw all

of that together.”

“I have MS, but I share a lot of issues with people who have spinal-cord injuries,” said Krueger, who uses forearm crutches. “What I’m looking for is resources.”

House, who was a bodybuilder and extreme skier before breaking his neck and injuring his spinal cord in a skiing accident 18 years ago, came up with the idea for the site in September 2006.

He said he wanted to create a community where the disabled, as well as their caregivers, family members, medical providers and colleagues, could be educated about conditions but also help one another by sharing real-life experiences.

With the Internet, House said, the expert advice he and other doctors give to patients at rehabilitation centers can be shared with someone who is “in a cabin in Idaho with Internet access.”

Longtime friends Roth and House launched Disaboom with \$14 million last year. The initial \$3 million came from selling 5.7 million shares of common stock at 50 cents per share. The stock trades on the OTC Bulletin Board under the symbol DSBO. Another \$11 million came from investors.

Roth said the site costs \$12 million a year to operate, with revenue coming from advertisers and sponsors. The site is free to users. Advertisers include Re/Max, Cricket Communications, Bioness, Avis and Ford Motor Co.

Michelle Pujol, who manages consumer websites for Cricket, said Disaboom opened the door to a hard-to-reach community. “You have a population that may or may not be traveling and seeing the bus (ads) that we have, or may not be getting radio,” she said.

The site so far has had more than 800,000 unique visitors since going live in October,

with more than 7,000 users participating in blogs and discussion groups, the company said.

Marla Paul, a Woodland Park mother of two boys with disabilities and a frequent blogger on Disaboom, said the site has made her feel less isolated.

“It’s parents supporting each other,” said Paul. “We’re up here in the mountains. There’s not a huge disability community up here.

“A community like Disaboom – it’s like all these minds. ... We can get together and brainstorm and say, ‘I’m having these kinds of issues.’”

House said Disaboom is about “living forward,” something he learned to do after his accident.

He was a 20-year-old biomedical science student at Texas A&M University when his skiing accident left him with limited hand movement and no movement or feeling below his chest. It also ended his plans to become a dentist.

House said he struggled emotionally for nearly a year, but never allowed the accident to become a life-stopping event.

He went on to train in physical medicine and rehabilitation and specialize in spinal-cord-injury medicine. He is currently the medical director of the Center for Neuro & Trauma Rehabilitation at Penrose Hospital in Colorado Springs.

Anne Cowles, 45, of Colorado Springs was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2001. She said she found a positive community in Disaboom.

“It was, ‘What do we need to do with this (disability) to move on?’ “ she said.

Krueger agrees.

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Disaboom.com users can ...

- Create personal profiles, share photos, and create and join groups.
- Review hotels, car-rental businesses, restaurants, amusement parks and other places for accessibility, and let other users know such details as whether counters were too high in a hotel or doorways were wide enough on a cruise ship.
- Find information about specific conditions, such as amputations, fibromyalgia or cerebral palsy. Disaboom hired specialists based at rehabilitation centers and hospitals across the country who provide information to users.
- Read magazine-style articles on issues such as when to reveal to a person you've met online that you're disabled; dealing with depression as a caregiver; which books are good for disabled children; or choosing an accessible vacation.

Starting next month, users will be able to search job boards on Disaboom, which has partnered with JobCentral.com to create a career center.

In March, Lovebyrd.com, a site for disabled singles that Disaboom purchased, will be featured on Disaboom, allowing for online dating.