

## **Press Release**

**28 November 2011**

### **Three finalists named for 2011 Stelios Award for Disabled Entrepreneurs in the UK**

Three outstanding entrepreneurs have been shortlisted for the 2011 Stelios Award for Disabled Entrepreneurs in the UK, a competition run by Sir Stelios Haji-loannou, the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation and the charity Leonard Cheshire Disability.

The disabled entrepreneurs - Ben Wolfenden, Rob Smith and Huw Thomas - saw off tough competition to make it to the final three of the prestigious award, which has been running for five years and recognises the achievements and unique challenges faced by disabled entrepreneurs.

The winner of the 2011 Stelios Award for Disabled Entrepreneurs in the UK will receive a £50,000 prize – one of the biggest of its kind – at a special awards ceremony to be held in London on 14 December 2011. They will also benefit from specialist support courtesy of the Stelios Scholar Reach-out Programme.

**Ben Wolfenden**, 28, who has Cystic Fibrosis, runs Equestrian Outfitters, an online retailer of equestrian products; from jodhpurs and riding boots to horse rugs and tack.

He said: “My Cystic Fibrosis affects every organ in my body, particularly my lungs. Starting my own business has meant that I don’t have to fit my work around my health – I have realised that the two can work in conjunction.”

“Despite setbacks and difficulties I work tirelessly for myself and future family. My fiance and I are getting married next year and I want to make sure I keep healthy to stay alive for her and also our future children.”

**Rob Smith**, 36, who suffered a spinal cord injury after falling 40 feet down a cliff, has invented a gripping aid which allows disabled people to firmly hold a wide variety of items, such as hammers, remote controls and sports equipment.

He said: "In July 1996 I fell down a cliff whilst on holiday with friends. I sustained a spinal cord injury which meant that I had to start using a wheelchair and my hand function was severely limited.

"The Active Hands Company started out when I asked my Mum to make a gripping aid I had designed to help me grip weights to do a workout. After a few prototypes we had a version which worked well. A few of my friends from wheelchair rugby saw me using the aid and asked for some to be made for them. After a few months we decided to start our own company."

**Huw Thomas**, 64, who has muscular dystrophy and uses a wheelchair, runs Promove UK, a company that designs, manufactures and supplies specialist slings used to rescue, evacuate and transfer sick, injured, disabled or incapacitated people.

He said: "After designing a sling for my own personal use, I realised there was a gap in the market for this kind of specialist equipment. Together with my business partner, Dana Thomas, I founded Promove in 2007.

"In running my business I face challenges every day. But being disabled has its advantages, providing unique experiences and insights. "

Sir Stelios says: "I would like to congratulate the finalists for reaching the shortlist of this year's Award and I am truly impressed by their entrepreneurial passion and dedication. We had a record number of excellent applications for this year's Award which is a testament to the achievements of disabled entrepreneurs like Ben, Rob and Huw.

“I am passionate about encouraging entrepreneurship through the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation, working in partnership with Leonard Cheshire Disability on this Award. With around 50 per cent of disabled adults out of work, removing the barriers disabled people face in business is essential. Self employment is often the only viable option for many disabled people as it offers flexibility and helps bypass much of the prejudice that, sadly, still exists.

“I look forward to awarding the prize to this year’s winner and seeing how they plan to grow their business.”

Jane Jutsum, Director of Strategic Partnerships and Innovation at Leonard Cheshire Disability, said: “Disabled people in business experience disadvantage and discrimination every day largely through ignorance - this must change.

“To be shortlisted the finalists had to prove that they are dynamic, driven entrepreneurs and that their businesses are destined to be a success.

“Leonard Cheshire Disability leads the way in enabling disabled people to succeed in business and in employment, and campaigns to challenge people to change the way they see disability. Our partnership with the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation is helping the charity highlight the barriers disabled people face in the workplace and recognise the outstanding achievements of disabled entrepreneurs.”

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### **Media enquiries**

For further information, photos and interview requests please contact Natalia Kannas in Leonard Cheshire Disability’s press office on 020 3242 0389 or email [natalia.kannas@LCDisability.org](mailto:natalia.kannas@LCDisability.org). Out of office 07903 949 388.

### **Notes to the editors:**

- **Leonard Cheshire Disability** supports thousands of disabled people in the UK and works in more than 50 countries. We campaign for change and provide innovative services that give disabled people the opportunity to live life their way. Visit [www.LCDisability.org/](http://www.LCDisability.org/)

- **The Stelios Philanthropic Foundation** is committed to dynamic philanthropy: making a positive, exponential difference through funding, inspiring and advising educational, entrepreneurial and environmental initiatives. Through the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation, Stelios has pledged £3m for 200 scholarships over ten years at the London School of Economics and London City University Cass Business School. The three finalists for Stelios' Award for Disabled Entrepreneurs will benefit from on-the-ground assistance with their businesses from the Stelios Scholar Reach Out Programme. Supervised by two faculty members from both LSE and Cass, three teams of Stelios Scholars will dedicate 10 hours of their time in a period of three months to assist each finalist. To find out more visit; [www.stelios.com](http://www.stelios.com)