

PRESS RELEASE
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TWO DISABLED ENTREPRENEURS SHARE 2011 STELIOS AWARD

-Winners for 2011 Stelios Award for Disabled Entrepreneurs announced-

Two disabled entrepreneurs have won joint first prize for the 2011 Stelios Award for Disabled Entrepreneurs in the UK, a competition run by Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation and the charity Leonard Cheshire Disability.

Rob Smith, 36, who has a spinal injury and uses a wheelchair, and Huw Thomas, 64, who has muscular dystrophy and uses a wheelchair, both saw off tough competition to win the prestigious award.

The initiative has been running for five years and recognises the achievements and unique challenges faced by disabled entrepreneurs. The two winners will benefit from £50,000 each to grow their business.

Sir Stelios said: "I would like to congratulate Rob and Huw on running successful businesses and displaying the drive, creativity and determination to reach the top and really fly. The £50,000 prize they have both received will ensure their businesses have an important boost for growth. Today, Rob and Huw join our community of entrepreneurs who are making a difference.

"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."

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

"To win this award Rob and Huw had to prove that they are dynamic, driven and their businesses; which are meeting a need in the market, are destined to be a huge 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 Sir Stelios is helping the charity highlight the barriers disabled people face in the workplace and recognise the outstanding achievements of disabled entrepreneurs."

The two winners will also benefit from specialist support courtesy of the Stelios Scholar Reach-out Programme.

More about Rob and his business

Rob's business, The Active Hands Company (www.activehands.co.uk), designs, manufactures and sells gripping aids which allow disabled people with limited hand function to grip a wide variety of items.

When he sustained a spinal injury after falling 40 feet down a cliff in 1996, he realised there was a gap in the market for specialist equipment that would allow disabled people to live more independently. With the help of his mother, Marion, he began to design his products and they set up the company in 2007.

Rob said: "I am absolutely thrilled to have won this Award, and would like to thank Sir Stelios, the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation and Leonard Cheshire Disability for making this possible. This news is a terrific boost to my business and will inspire our whole team for the future."

Rob's products allow disabled people to live more independently and are fast becoming popular because they enable them to get a firm hold on almost anything, from gym equipment and snooker cues to Nintendo Wii controllers.

"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 and developments with my Mum working to my designs on her sewing machine, 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."

Sadly, Rob's mother was diagnosed with cancer soon after the company was founded and died in 2008. Rob now runs the company with his father and sister, and they currently employ six members of staff to manufacture the products.

Rob says of his family business: "We wanted to carry on the business for Mum's sake and wanted the challenge and excitement of growing and expanding it to realise its full potential."

Today, The Active Hands Company is used by people with a variety of disabilities. Rob's products have proved particularly successful in the sports world; he has produced orders for GB Paralympic rowers and wheelchair rugby players. The gripping aids have also been filmed in use on Channel 4's Incredible Athletes, a documentary about Paralympic athletes and BBC1's Harry's Arctic Heroes, following injured service personnel conquer the North pole.

More about Huw and his business

Huw's business, Promove UK (www.promove.uk.com), designs, manufactures and supplies specialist slings used to rescue, evacuate and transfer sick, injured, disabled or incapacitated people.

Huw said: "With this fantastic prize I will be able to expand my business much quicker. Thank you Sir Stelios and Leonard Cheshire Disability. After designing a sling for my own personal use, I realised there was a gap in the market for this kind of specialist equipment.

"In running my business I face challenges every day. When I am away from home I need wheelchair accessible accommodation, which can limit my choices. When I travel on business I have to take a driver with me. And because I have limited use of my hands I find typing increasingly difficult and use voice recognition software.

"But being disabled has its advantages, providing unique experiences and insights. According to a Chinese proverb 'the gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without trials' and that is the philosophy I go by!"

Huw founded Promove UK with his business partner, Dana Thomas, in 2007.

New designs by Huw were added to the line and the company quickly grew. Today his customers include fire, ambulance and police services, schools and colleges, airport ground handlers, holiday organisations, shipping, care homes, social services, charities and disabled individuals. Promove also supply slings for humanitarian aid operations, and Huw's products have been used recently in Haiti and India.

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Media enquiries

- For further information and interview requests, and photographs please contact Natalia Kannas in Leonard Cheshire Disability's press office on 020 3242 0389 or email 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

- 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