



LESSONS FROM

RALPH

RALPH W. BRAUN • BRAUNABILITY FOUNDER • 1940-2013



## THE STORY OF

# BraunAbility

Ralph Braun was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy at an early age and unable to walk by the time he turned 15. Using a manual wheelchair left him completely exhausted by the end of the day, and he knew there had to be a better way to stay independent. He started to tinker in his cousin's farm shop, and soon the world's first electric scooter was born. Ralph dubbed his invention the Tri-Wheeler, and word of the life-changing scooter quickly spread among the disability community.



In the early years, Ralph rode his Tri-Wheeler the short distance to and from work in every type of weather. But when his employer relocated further away from his home, the snowy Indiana winters presented a new mobility challenge. Once again, he took to the shop and soon engineered the world's first



wheelchair lift. He placed a small ad displaying the lift, and to his shock, his phone began ringing off the hook with orders.

Ralph eventually quit his full-time job to focus efforts on his developing company. Despite overwhelming odds and just a handful of employees, Ralph grew his business, and in the process, a new industry emerged. Over the next four decades, Ralph would see his products help returning Vietnam veterans, make public school transportation a reality for children in wheelchairs, and give wheelchair users freedom of choice with the groundbreaking lowered floor minivan. Finally, wheelchair users could be mobile and still blend in with the rest of the automotive world. Today BraunAbility has over 1000 employees, all working to grow mobility not just across the country, but around the world.



Ralph passed away in 2013, but the outstanding legacy he left us still lives through the Five Lessons he left behind — the driving force behind everything we do at BraunAbility still today.

LESSON



# PUT THE CUSTOMER FIRST



The story goes that one Friday afternoon Ralph Braun wheeled down to the assembly line and picked one of the newly built vans to test drive over the weekend. He asked a foreman for the keys, and the startled employee stuttered, "Well, Mr. Braun...I guess I didn't know you'd be taking this van."

Ralph turned to the man and said, "Would you have built it any differently if you had?"

It was a teachable moment for the foreman and, as the story was told again and again, for the generations of employees to follow. "Build every van like you're building it for me, or your own mother, or for your son – because some day you may have to," he'd say.

For many years, if you'd call our headquarters and ask to speak to Mr. Braun, there was a good chance he'd answer the phone. Ralph was accessible to his customers. He listened, and then he acted. In turn, we learned how to respect our customers and earn their trust still today.

LESSON



**NO  
EXCUSES**

Ralph had every opportunity in the world to make excuses for himself – why he couldn't go to school or get a job or even get out of bed in the morning. But he never made excuses for himself. Instead, he built an entire industry and made automotive accessibility a reality in American society.



When you report to a man like that, you don't make excuses. As one of his earliest employees and close friends says, "Rarely were excuses necessary. Ralph was a master at motivating people. He was gifted with a character that made people want to do great things."

Over the past 40 years, we've learned a little something about setting expectations for our company, our products, our life – and exceeding them. We have every intention of making the impossible possible in mobility – just like Ralph did. No excuses.

LESSON

3

SURROUND  
YOURSELF WITH  
**GOOD  
PEOPLE**

“So what’s the secret to your success?”

It was common for Ralph to be asked this question, and you could expect the same reply: “I surround myself with good people – and then I get out of the way.”



As part of the team he built, we heard these words often. It was a little unreal to believe that he felt like we could do the work that would live up to his standards.

But then again, Ralph was used to relying on people. He couldn’t do everything for the company or even for himself. Ralph relied on his team of caregivers and family and employees to help him through a day – and a life. Those people had to be skilled and qualified – but most importantly they had to share his values and a vision of a customer-focused culture. Ralph is gone, but our team remains – and we’re working harder than ever toward his vision.

LESSON

4

**NEVER STOP  
IMPROVING**



Here's a story that was only shared after Ralph passed away: in his late 50s, long after his company was leading the mobility industry, Ralph decided he wasn't a strong public speaker. It bothered him, and he knew as CEO of a growing company, he would be called upon to speak again and again.

He decided to go back to college and take a course in Public Speaking. Two nights a week for a full semester, he drove himself an hour away from his home to a local college. Imagine the contrast: a room full of 19-year-old college students and one older man in a motorized scooter.

He loved that class, and he learned. In fact, he was voted by his class as one of two contenders for their end-of-year speech competition. Ralph beamed with pride over the honor, and asked his family to come watch him that evening.

Whatever he could do to make his company or himself better as a leader – he did it, and he reminded us that success in life can breed complacency. In Ralph's mind, there was no greater sin than believing improvement had a finish line.

LESSON



# BELIEVE IN YOUR GOD-GIVEN ABILITY

*"Ralph told me often that life is a ladder, and everyone is going up the same rungs," said a close friend and employee. "You'll always have someone pulling your foot to bring you down to their level or crawling over you to get ahead. Keep focused. Hold tight to what you believe in."*

Ralph faced enormous obstacles in his life, but he believed in the ability God gave him. He didn't set out to blaze a trail as a mobility pioneer. He set out to show his doctors he didn't need to be institutionalized. He set out to show a school system that students with physical disabilities deserve to be educated. He set out to prove the banks wrong who would not loan money to a man in a wheelchair.

As he fought and won again and again and again, he did what incredible leaders do. He made us ask, "Why not me?"

Why not? That God-given ability is different for each of us, but it's there. We can use it to fight the battles, to blaze the trails, to be the difference between status quo and a better way of life. Just like Ralph did.





# THE LEGACY LIVES ON



The BraunAbility employees who worked alongside Ralph Braun in those early years saw the humble beginnings he came from and how often he was told to quit. Fortunately for all of us, he never did.

For those who will never know Ralph personally, these five lessons reflect the spirit of a man who changed the world for wheelchair users, starting with himself. BraunAbility is dedicated to continuing the work he started. His lessons are alive here — visible on our walls, shared in our messages and built into every product we manufacture. It's our promise, our privilege to carry on Ralph's legacy and drive independence throughout the world.



*Life is a Moving Experience®*

# join the community

Meet other wheelchair users and caregivers  
and learn about our entire product line-up on  
the BraunAbility Facebook page.

 /BraunAbility



**more of the experience**

**braunability.com** – Visit us online to find the right  
mobility fit for you or schedule a free, no-obligation mobility  
consultation with your nearest dealership.



800-THE-LIFT • 800-843-5438 • braunability.com