

**By Visala James for GADRA December 2023**

Hi! My name is Visala James. I am a retired corporate executive and proud mother of 2 daughters living in Switzerland with my husband and mom. I and my husband Rob, have enjoyed a 35 year corporate career that has taken our family to many parts of the globe.

5 years ago, our lives changed forever. Rob sustained an almost fatal injury, breaking his back in a triathlon. Thrown into the world of spinal cord injury, we have been on what can only be described as a wild rollercoaster ride of operations, rehabilitation and recurring setbacks. I took early retirement and we pivoted our focus to rebuilding our lives and helping others with spinal cord injury.

Living in the birthplace of the International Red Cross, we are surrounded by news of war & natural disasters in Europe and as a caregiver for a loved one with a spinal cord injury, I was horrified to learn of the inequalities associated with disaster relief aid. The thought of someone like my husband getting limited access to aid or equipment was unbearable.

This is how GADRA, Global Alliance for Disaster Resource Acceleration came into my life. I was searching for any organized disaster relief effort helping those with disabilities when I came across World Institute on Disability (WID) and GADRA. My contacting them in 2022 translated into being asked to source wheelchairs for those newly disabled in Türkiye & Syria.

I spent the next 3 months researching, identifying and convincing relevant organizations who could help. Amazingly enough, the answer closest to home came through first. The Swiss centre of excellence for advice on medical aids (SAHB) donates all used wheelchairs for aid outside Switzerland but their stock is committed months in advance. Multiple emails and personal visits later, the centre agreed to test a small shipment of 25 wheelchairs to GADRA... *we had the equipment!!!*

Then came the next big hurdle, *how to transport them across many borders?* After another 3 months exploring many avenues, GADRA's partner Beyazay generously agreed to transport the wheelchairs. So, on a glorious July 5<sup>th</sup> morning, I and the President of Beyazay Switzerland, Mr. Sahin, convened at a warehouse in Zurich, an hour and a half from our respective locations. We met with the warehouse manager, Mr. Wunderlin, to sign the paperwork and load the wheelchairs. Here is my personal journal entry which I believe it says it all....

"The whole experience of collecting the wheelchairs and sending them on their way to those in need in Türkiye & Syria brought tears to my eyes.... What a wonderful moment.... to know that this small act, through the effort of many, will have a profound impact on easing the suffering of another human being...."

As I close my story, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the whole team at WID and GADRA, for allowing me to be part of their community. They are amazing individuals, working together to make a real impact. This experience has fed my spirit and given broader context to my personal ups & downs, shifting from self-pity to gratitude for what I am blessed with every single day - my husband Rob, whose indomitable spirit and love of life will always be my oxygen.