



*EasyRider customers enjoying the view from the summit of Maungatautiri.*

# Wasn't born to follow

**EasyRider NZ is a bus company with a difference. Owner operator Hilary McLachlan is no bikie, but she aims to be wheelie friendly.**

**"DO YOU HAVE AN EASYRIDER IN DUNEDIN?"** a caller recently asked Hilary McLachlan. Unfortunately for Dunedin, the answer is no – but that's the kind of brand recognition any bus company would be delighted to have.

EasyRider is a niche business, its story a classic of the 'they said it couldn't be done' genre.

At the age of 50, 'Larry' McLachlan bought her first bus, a 6-metre Isuzu with a rear lift, convincing her husband that if it didn't work out they could turn it into a motor home.

She had seen a need for a coach service that catered for people with mobility restrictions. "I'm in business by default," she admits, "because nobody else thought it was worth doing."

Back in 2001 she was told that somebody else would already have done it if it was an idea that could work.

All McLachlan knew for sure was that the need existed. She had worked for IHC before she married, and then once her children were at school began driving a vehicle for Dial-a-Ride in Hamilton – the only one in the city with a hoist, and so popular that a booking system was needed and later a second vehicle

was introduced. Then Total Mobility, a national service for disabled people, was introduced in 1985. She trained taxi drivers for the programme until the council subsidy ended in 1986 and she was made redundant. In 1988 she began Special Needs school runs, which she continued until starting her own business.

So more likely, perhaps, is that this was an idea that few other people could have made work. "I've been lifting wheelchairs for longer than anyone else in New Zealand," laughs Hilary McLachlan.

**A RECENT SUCCESS FOR** the EasyRider business is its travel club. McLachlan had joined her mother up with a travel club run by Leisure Time Tours and they proved to be something of an inspiration. She'd always thought disabled people should have similar opportunities,

and in 2000 she organised a successful trip from Hamilton to Auckland's Ellerslie Flower Show. She tracked down what she calls Hamilton's "best kept secret" – an urban bus equipped with wheelchair access – and hired it (and another coach) to take 59 people from a variety of disabled groups, including 15 in wheelchairs.

**"I've been lifting wheelchairs for longer than anyone else in New Zealand!"**

Today, her Wheelie-Friendly Travel Club is over-subscribed, offering trips to various places of interest in the Waikato region. "Sometimes it's just a nice place for lunch, but always a nice drive through our beautiful countryside to accessible destinations". Home pickups are part of the service.

She is now trying to figure out how she will fit everyone in for the midwinter excursion to Roselands Restaurant above Waitomo. It looks like both her buses will be needed.

The Cambridge Stroke Club are another regular group. Their last trip up the west bank of the Waikato River (where many had never been before), past Huntly for lunch at the Rangiriri Tearooms.

They travel in comfort in an 11-metre Isuzu or a smaller Toyota Coaster, riding high enough so that those in wheelchairs can enjoy the view. It's another little thing that her years of experience have taught her – that Dial-a-Ride vehicle was a Bedford Jumbo that allowed passengers to see out the windows, unlike, say, a Hiace.

"A lot of people I know," remarks Hilary McLachlan, "hate the 'little white vans'."

That's the beauty of her work, she thinks – the regular clients whose needs she is familiar with. The Atawhai Assisi Home &



Australian under-20s basketball team



Hilary McLachlan (front) with some Wheel Blacks team members.

Hospital is another such client, for whom she takes residents on a regular but always varied 75 km round trip. "They bring their flasks and afternoon tea, and because there's a vinyl floor I don't mind them eating on the bus!" Of course, there is also the small matter of the extra hour that would be needed to get everyone off the bus and back on again.

Sports teams are another significant group of customers. EasyRider have carried most of the wheelchair rugby teams in the North Island at one time or another and even venturing as far afield as Christchurch. A wheelchair tennis tournament is held every year in Hamilton and McLachlan drives up to Auckland to bring in the international competitors.

**RECENTLY SHE LOOKED** after the Australian under-20 wheelchair basketball team. "Because I had them for the whole time, I was able to take them places – like the Craters of the Moon near Taupo. Most disabled athletes arrive, are taken to their hotel and then to wherever their matches are played, and they see nothing of the country, so it was great to be able to provide that."

The extra care was certainly appreciated. Head Coach Barry Barker, who is also director of the Australian Athletes with Disabilities Association, later told McLachlan that "the vehicle we travelled in was the best equipped I have encountered during my time in this sport in any venue in the world. Your own disposition and ability as a tour guide in providing us with some welcome sightseeing diversions from our training and playing schedule was very much appreciated by players and management. I would certainly recommend you on

any future trip for us to New Zealand, and to any disabled group of people who require prompt and comfortable transportation."

In February this year McLachlan visited Wellington for the Rugby Sevens, ferrying 25 seriously injured rugby players to and from the stadium for the New Zealand Rugby Foundation.

With two buses, a busy schedule and very satisfied customers, EasyRider is a business poised to take off. No one else in the country is offering a service quite like it. But McLachlan is not getting any younger.

Although, it needs to be mentioned, she did compete in the first Transqual Rodeo in Christchurch back in 2007: "I was last – I'm used to driving very carefully! But one of the judges told me later that I'd done the best backing manoeuvre of the day. I wanted to push my boundaries and upskill, and those buses were at least two metres longer than I'm used to."

Although what she has achieved so far has been done entirely by her, on a shoestring, with no funding or subsidy from regional councils or the like, she would love to find another person to help take the business to the next level.

'Larry' McLachlan, who has spent more than 30 years in the transport sector working with people with various disabilities, is a tireless advocate who has shown what is possible by doing it herself. She is a star and an asset to the bus and coach industry.



The EasyRider fleet, painted in its new livery.