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Man reaches out to young on a crusade for tolerance

By Dawn S. Onley
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Slouched in a simple armchair in the front of an auditorium, a casually dressed 29-year-old man has suddenly grabbed the attention of 180 restless schoolchildren.

"How difficult would it be to stop being cruel to other kids and just start to accept them?" Scott Chesney asks the kindergartners and first- and second-graders. At first they offer no response, staring straight ahead at Chesney, quizzical expressions on their young faces.

"Do you think you could do that?" says Chesney. And this time, as if suddenly startled awake, the children scream "yes" in a shrill pitch that reverberates around the room.

Chesney looks from side to side at the children seated on mats in the auditorium of Cedar Grove's South End School. Each of them clutches a teddy bear — some worn and chewed, others clean and new. The children were asked by their teachers to bring their stuffed bears in for Chesney's talk.

"I know it's tough, but if you can say to yourself, how would I feel if somebody made fun of me." There's a brief pause as if Chesney wants to emphasize something. "You would feel sad," he says.

And he knows.

Chesney has been in a wheelchair for nearly 15 years, paralyzed from the waist down. His disability is the result of an extremely rare condition known as Foix-Alajouanine Syndrome. It is caused when stroke-like symptoms cause a blood vessel to burst in the spinal cord. In 1985, Chesney was only the 12th documented case in the world.

Almost overnight, Chesney went from being an all-star basketball and football player at Verona High School to losing the function of his motor and sensory nerves. He refers to his doctor's words that he'll never walk again as "a death sentence."

Yet, he has spent half of his life searching for answers. In 1997, Chesney went around the world — to India, Singapore, Bali, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, China,

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JOHN O'BOYLE/THE STAR-LEDGER

Scott Chesney tells children at South End School in Cedar Grove, "We're looking to talk with kids just like you."

Chesney

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Man aims to teach tolerance

Japan, England, France, Greece, Germany, Italy and Hawaii — looking for an alternative cure for his disease.

And last Friday, he embarked on the second leg of his second world tour, Devotion to Motion, which will take him to more than a dozen countries over a six-month period. This time, even more than searching for a cure, Chesney and his wife, Pratiksha, will be preaching tolerance and acceptance to all who will listen. They also will be encouraging disabled people to overcome their limitations, and researching how countries handle the issue of accessibility.

This trip is being sponsored by almost two dozen corporations, but two of the major sponsors are Tyco International and Continental Airlines, which is underwriting many of the flights.

Chesney plans to spend a lot of time talking with children on this trip. Youngsters like 5-year-old Lauren Selle of Cedar Grove, a feisty kindergarten who had loads of questions for him on the weekday morning he spent at South End. Lauren caught Chesney off guard when she told him that her teddy bear accepted his differences and wanted to be his friend.

Another girl with long, brown hair tied back in a ponytail added that

she, too, is different since she has asthma. Then another child chimed in that her grandmother is sickly and has trouble breathing.

"We're looking to talk with kids just like you," Chesney tells the bunch.

After the discussion, Chesney explains his mission further.

"I'm a facilitator," he said. "I just try to inspire people. What they see in me, they can't see in themselves yet. I'm playing out a role for them. They're an inspiration and courageous in their own right, they just don't see it yet."

He is quick to point out that he doesn't want anyone's pity because he has reached the point in his life where he doesn't pity himself. In fact, walking again is no longer of utmost importance to Chesney. He has found happiness from within.

"I'll be honest with you, a part of me thinks it might be my destiny to be in a wheelchair, my message of hope to people," Chesney said. "I've accepted my paralysis. No longer is there all this anger anymore."

To learn more about Scott Chesney or his Devotion to Motion tour, log on to his Internet address at www.d2motion.com.