Good times rolling for funny-van man

Vans modified to express the owners' fancies are almost commonplace on Arlington streets. One boxy vehicle recently appearing around town represents wishfulfillment of a different sort.

Look inside this plain blue Chevrolet and you won't find shag carpeting or cushiony seating. Instead, you're suddenly aware of what's missing: a driver's seat and a steering wheel. And extending from the dashboard, a large dark metal box resembling a workbench sprouts a complicated-looking arrangement of chains, switches and cables that make the dream possible.

The van belongs to John Dycus, Shorthorn adviser and a beginning driver at age 28. For Dycus, who has cerebral palsy, independent travel until now has been limited to getting around in a motorized wheelchair.

"I'VE BEEN BLESSED with good '40s. With those, floor pedals are merefriends - and parents - who would take me practically anywhere I wanted done a lot of the driving. Now she worries so much when I drive that the other controls. point of diminishing returns may be

That concern, however, stems most-said. "Otherwise they won't work." ly from the natural anxiety of having a new driver in the family. In adapting the vehicle to meet Dycus' needs, safety and reliability had top priority for J. R. Baker, the engineer who designed the controls, and Roger

people have done," Dycus said. "It really does work, just like they plan-

THEIR ACHIEVEMENT, he explained, goes far beyond that of handcontrol devices on the market since the

ly replaced by a lever — pushed to accelerate, pulled to brake. But the driver to go," he says. "The van will take still needs enough range in his other some of this off my mother, who's arm to turn a steering wheel and enough finger dexterity to operate

> "These modifications are just dandy if you've got two good arms," Dycus

The controls in Dycus' van use his shoulder and arm muscles together with his hands' gripping and pushing capacities to perform all the driving operations. With one small lever, his left hand does the steering, accelerating Dycus, John's father, who built them. and braking, while his right operates "I think it's amazing what these two the gear shift and pushbutton switches for turn signals and horn.

> Other equipment makes it possible to get in and out of the van, as well as drive, while remaining in his

FINDING SOMEONE who could

accomplish all this - and at a price Dycus could afford - took more than dozen years, from the time he developed the typical American high school boy's yearning for a car.

"I'd always envisioned a joystick of some sort," he said, referring to the steering and speed lever.

He began investigating the possibilities, getting in touch with anyone who might offer a solution. "I'd get the phone book down and turn to the Yellow Pages and start making calls," he said. One firm estimated a cost of \$30,000 to outfit an automobile for his

Letters to others around the country brought "just enough response to keep me interested." One went to Ed Roth, a flamboyant California showcar builder whose "Beatnik Bandit" featured a joystick. Roth replied that the Bandit couldn't be driven on the street and advised: "Your best deal is to marry a rich chick and hire somebody to drive you around."

"I SUSPECT everybody thought I was crazy," Dycus recalled. He described their attitude as "it's nice for you to shoot for the moon but I know and you know this can't be done, though we certainly admire you for

Still optimistic, he continued to save money for the car. Living at home kept expenses minimal and, he added, "I didn't have a car to take me places where I could spend it."

His hopes rose in 1973 when first one, then a second UTA engineering student tackled the project; however, both graduated before a design could be implemented.

LOOKING BACK, Dycus regards the disappointments philosophically. "I met a lot of people and received some encouragement. Maybe I was too young then for the responsibility."

A friend at church who had given Dycus some books on hydraulics and automotive electrical systems discussed the project with Baker, a General Dynamics flight test engineer, and introduced the two.

A deeply religious man, Baker told Dycus of his conviction that the job could be done. Calling it "a very large task," the engineer said "I wouldn't undertake it except that I feel the Lord wants me to do it."

With this motivation, Baker offered his skills without charge.

THE DECISION was made to buy the V-8, automatic shift Chevy van in October 1974. Describing the night they brought it home, Dycus said "I was sitting beside him (my father), behind the motor. I'm not an overly emotional person - I tend to be on an even keel - but I can recall being moved. It was my money and the van was in my name.

"Of course, at this stage, we thought it would be six months, but it took two

The leading that Baker felt seemed to prevail during the development of the equipment. "In everything we tried to do," Dycus said, "when we needed somebody to give some help, we did

W. H. Reed, a family friend who had a machine shop in Bridgeport, offered his services, supplying "literally thousands of dollars worth of machine work for free," Dycus said. "Overall, it cost \$2,700 for steel and the hydraulic motor and valves and a few mistakes."

A FORT WORTH neighbor helped with the building and a friend of Baker's relieved their apprehensions about plumbing requirements. "We could just see oil spurting everywhere,"

You're not sitting in oil up to your knees and that was a fear."

When the family moved to Arlington, three blocks away they found Bill Meador, "a man who makes cars for a living and can do anything in steel." Meador installed the seat belts and came up with a simplified method for shifting gears.

"EVERYTHING HAS WORKED out extra well, and I am most thankful for this," Dycus said.

He enters the van on a hydraulic lift - standard equipment - which descends at the side door in response to switches on the outside. It folds up once he's inside. A hydraulically operated mechanism designed by Baker secures the chair with hooks from the floor, at the same time releasing the emergency brake.

The added hydraulics work off a standard power steering pump. Oil also is forced into an accumulator, an emergency power reserve to allow steering and braking should the motor

THE BRAKES WORK by "a valve on the floor which is on a movable plate linked up here to my hand by a cable," explained Dycus. Controlled by his left hand, the joystick, a 41/25-

Dycus remembers, "but it's very clean. inch lever rising from the desk-like control box, also regulates the speed by a cable to the accelerator.

The stick's most impressive feat is enabling Dycus to steer the 5,000pound van. Baker's design, and Roger Dycus' construction, succeed in reconciling a tiny movement of this lever with the multiple rotations normally made by a steering wheel.

A sideways tilt of the stick activates a hydraulic valve which determines the left or right movement of a hydraulic motor. From this motor a chain loops around a sprocket on the steering column to turn it.

Baker was originally unsure the van would be controllable at speeds greater than 40 miles an hour, but Dycus has achieved 52 "on the freeway with no traffic around me.

"I CHANGE LANES like a pro of course, there's not much market for that. The reason I do that well is the makeup of the van. Just a small movement of the stick will zip into the other

Dycus may eventually overcome the need for giving himself on-the-road pep-talks, "just to keep alert." But, he said, "I don't think I will ever become complacent. It's just too exciting, too much fun to drive."



JOHN DYCUS...joystick visions

Shorthorn: Jan Sprawls

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