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How I was Bitten by the Amateur Radio Bug

By Justin Mattes, KC2GIK
May 2, 2002

A desire to perform public service provided the incentive to push a disability aside in this person's quest for an Amateur Radio license.

We all have stories about how we were bitten by the Amateur Radio bug. Some of us have family members who are hams. My approach was to just listen on the ham bands. I spent countless hours tuning around the 2-meter band and learning as much as I could about ham radio. It was a lot different from listening to police dispatches and other public safety calls.



Justin seems pleased with his new Patcomm PC-500 dual band HF radio. [Photos by David Kozinn, K2DBK]

At first I had little interest in getting a license. That changed when I realized how hams provided public service in times of need. I was listening to the local repeaters when tropical storm *Floyd* hit New Jersey in September 1999. Telephone service was down for days and hams became a vital source of communications. I heard

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first hand the vital services that hams provided to the communities. These are only some of the factors that persuaded me to get my ticket.

Without support from Mike Adams, WA2MWT, and other hams, I don't think I would have earned my license. He had seen my Website with all the police frequencies on it and decided to send me an e-mail. Once Mike explained the connection between emergency management and Amateur Radio, I became even more interested in becoming a ham. David Kozinn, K2DBK, was the first ham I ever met. We had known each other before he got his license. We used e-mail to discuss our interests in monitoring. He then went on to get his Amateur Radio license. When he first announced his call sign over the air, I knew I had to get mine, too. David told me about the [10-70 Repeater Association](#). After a few days of listening to the club's repeater, I decided to contact Joyce Birmingham, KA2ANF, the club's Vice President. She explained to me that people with all kinds of disabilities had earned licenses. I felt ready to take the challenge and hoped that I could really get on the air. After a few months of studying, I took my Technician test at the 10-70 VE session in Paramus, New Jersey.



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An Obstacle

The biggest obstacle I have is my disability. It affects my entire body and my speech. At first I used this as an excuse not to try for my license. Having cerebral palsy does affect my speech a great deal. Sometimes it takes a lot of physical effort just to get a sentence out. I became a member of the 10-70 Repeater Association and met many hams who helped me in the hobby.

Just one example of the difficulties that I face every day is holding a microphone. I sometimes find it difficult to control the motion of my hands, so the stock microphone that came with my dual-band rig does not work for me. I kept accidentally hitting the DTMF buttons, which frustrated me and annoyed other hams. However, with the help of Paul Beshlian, KC2CJW, I now have a desk microphone with only one giant red PTT button.

Every so often I meet some hams on the air who won't make the extra effort to understand me. I've been on 2 meters for over a year. Still, every once in a while a ham might question my intentions on the air. After a few passes around the group, they get used to my speech and treat me equally, which gives me a good feeling.

At Field Day 2001 the members of the 10-70 Club encouraged me to take the 5-WPM code test. I went home Saturday night and studied the code. Sunday morning I passed the exam. I plan to earn my General license within a year.

Getting on the HF bands has been my goal ever since I started listening to shortwave radio. Knowing that I could make contact with people around the world really excites me. At times my speech is hard to understand on the repeater. I wonder if it will be even more difficult on SSB. After I had passed the code test, my friends Pat Sawey, WA2PFS, and Paul Beshlian, KC2CJW, suggested I get involved in the digital modes. I am very good at the computer keyboard. This skill might help level the field between other hams and myself. PSK31 is one of the modes that was suggested to me. Last Field Day I watched Pat operate PSK-31. The computer-radio interface interested me because I had worked with computers since I was five. When I saw a contact from Florida scroll across the screen, I knew I had to operate digital modes. Pat went to the [Patcomm Corporation](#) and explained my situation. They were interested. Jim, a company representative,

presented me with a PC-500 dual band HF radio at the 10-70 Club meeting in September. I was now set up for 20 and 40 meters. Patcomm also included an interface cable to use between my computer and rig. A few weeks later I had an antenna party at my home. 10-70 Club members came over and put up a G5RVjr. I am now able to monitor PSK31 and I'm working hard towards my General class license.

Disability is Not a Barrier

When I was younger I wanted to become a fireman or policeman--just like any other boy my age. A few years went by and it was obvious I couldn't fulfill those dreams because of my disabilities, yet I still wanted to help other people. Now, as a ham, I decided to become an emergency management volunteer. A lot of the hams I know are involved in emergency management and explained to me how being a radio operator is a valuable function. My town, Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey, isn't that big and the emergency management volunteers consist mainly of public safety personnel. They welcomed me--and my knowledge of Amateur Radio--into their organization. Being a ham is a way to assist in emergency situations. My disability is not a problem.



Justin (left) looks on as Paul Beshlian, KC2CJW, and Melissa Beshlian, K2MIS, solder connections on the G5RVjr antenna.

Ham radio has given me independence and a connection with the world I never thought I could have. People I meet on the air are impressed with my operating ability. Passing the code test gave me the confidence to continue upgrading my license. Every time I transmit I feel a sense of accomplishment and belonging. By using digital technology like PSK-31, there is no limit to what can be accomplished over the airwaves. The best thing about being a ham is the fact that someday I might be able to assist someone in an emergency situation. This is just the start of my adventure into the world of Amateur Radio.

Justin Mattes, KC2GIK, lives in Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey. He holds a Technician class license. Justin is the RACES officer for the Woodcliff Lake OEM as well as a Skywarn Spotter for Bergen County. He can be reached at jaymatt1978@excite.com.

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