

WALKING TALL

Rob DeBlois never let his wheelchair keep him down. Now the nationally respected education reformer wants to fix Providence's schools. Will he get the chance?

BY TOM AHERN

"Know what a Republican is?"

It's a cold day in Seekonk, on the deck behind the home of Rob and Bonilyn DeBlois. Their ten-year-old son Eric is kicking a soccer ball against a backboard. Their other son, twelve-year-old Justin, is inside, concentrating on the computer.

Rob is in his wheelchair. He arches his back, stretching, unbending, as he does every minute or so. That stretch pretty much defines the limits of his mobility. He can use his shoulder muscles. He owns his biceps, but not his triceps.

His face bears an expression of moderately fiendish challenge. "A Republican is a guy who was born on third base." He pauses. "And thinks he hit a triple."

This is social commentary. Rob is dissing people with too many opinions and too little experience — the pompous, the know-it-alls, the ones with easy answers

for fixing education. He is also making gentle fun of his brothers, all businessmen, all Republicans, all born — like him — on third base, heirs apparent to the DeBlois oil kingdom. Except a national energy company bought that business, so the heirs found other things to do. DB Marts. Banking. Business. In Rob's case, school reform.

He's also talking about how easy it is for some people. And how hard it is for the kids he and his teachers work with. Every school day he rides in his lift-equipped van from the *Town and Country* landscapes of Seekonk, to tend the bottomless intellectual and emotional needs of troubled kids from the state's poorest neighborhoods and neediest homes.

Of course, being quadriplegic is bad, but it isn't as bad as these kids have it.

"People see someone who's crippled," says Rob. "and they can relate to that. 'Oh my God, it must be so

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