

NORTHWEST HERALD

Local News and Video for McHenry County, Illinois

Local News

Print & Published Online: Friday, November 12, 2004

Area photographer documents Alaska

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ALGONQUIN - David Farber faces things head-on that make most people shudder: bears, alligators, glaciers, even near-death experiences.

Farber, 51, of Carpentersville, became paralyzed in all but his right arm after a 1981 motorcycle accident. The wreck left him in a coma for weeks and hospitalized for a year.

But Farber did not give up his lifelong quest to photograph nature. He trekked to Alaska twice in the past year, the first person in an electric wheelchair to be escorted through Denali National Park.

His work is on display and on sale this month and next at the Algonquin Area Public Library, 2600 Harnish Drive.

Kammren Cusack, an 18-year-old Dundee-Crown High School senior from Algonquin, was drawn to Farber's photographs when visiting the library Thursday. Cusack aspires to study photography, he said, and marveled at Farber's work as well as his having overcome major obstacles.

"The shots are amazing," Cusack said. "The colors, the clarity. It's really great."

Farber chatted with Cusack about his outdoor adventures and their mutual fascination with moose. He talked about the camera equipment he designed to overcome his disability. He snaps photographs by sipping a tube while keeping his good hand free to focus the shot.

Within minutes, Cusack bent over to hug a smiling, tearful Farber.

Farber just finished writing his life story, "As Best I Can: Journeys From a Wheelchair by the Grace of God." He hopes to have it published.

Farber's independent nature was forged early on, when he was separated from his two sisters and thrust into foster care at age 7.

He first was turned on to photography at age 13 on a trip with his foster family to the Florida Everglades.

"Ever since I could remember, I never wanted to work with anything but critters," he said. "I have no fear of any animal alive."

With his Kodak Instamatic camera, a teenage Farber shot slides of Florida alligators. The experience compelled him to save up for a "real" camera.

He went on to earn a bachelor's degree in biology from Northeastern Illinois University. Farber's enduring love for science remains sharp, as he aptly described the geography, geology and wildlife of Alaska and the Midwest.

He said he spent decades saving for the \$12,000 Alaska trips. Once there, pilots flew him by seaplane, and park rangers took him to remote locations.

"It seemed like everyone I met was willing to go out of their way to help me," he said. "I don't know if it was because I was chasing a dream, one that most people wouldn't, especially in my condition."