

## **Accessibility**

**By Jenna Hill, Self-advocate**

Due to a bad car accident in 1986, I was left with a closed head injury, very weak on my left side, and having a breathy voice. Now, I am having to do things in different ways that would be considered out of the norm but accomplishing the same desired goal. I have been forced to accept and deal with the small minds of today's culture, or its one way of doing things mentality. The old saying rings true, "there's more than one way to skin a cat." I have no clue what skinning a cat has to do with people changing the way that they think, but it does. An example of changing the way you do stuff, with the same desired effect, is how I put on my eyeliner. I stabilize my hand on my cheek because my hand spasms so much. Nevertheless, I do what needs to be done.

One of my many challenges is accessibility or lack thereof. To me, accessibility means usable. After my accident, I found out how unusable things really are. It is incredible how many things normal people take advantage of, simple things like going to the bathroom or things that you wouldn't have to think about before, now become something you have to think about doing or deal with the consequences.

A lot of changes have already happened, but a lot of changes have yet to happen, in terms of accessibility.

This is evident especially with older buildings. In earlier years the need was not there for handicap accessible buildings or more likely handicap people have become bolder about getting our needs met. The problem of accessibility still remains. The Fair Housing Act, passed in 1988, clearly states that it will require most buildings to provide adequate accessibility for people in chair bound situations. The buildings made before the Fair Housing Act came into existence, however, do not have to comply with the Act, if the establishment has been providing the same service since the bill came into effect. They call this a grandfather clause. Several years ago, at a nightclub in the San Mateo area that had no ramps, I had a fall down a flight of stairs while in my wheelchair. This was no little fall; it was like something you see in the movies. This is an example of a building not complying with the law. It has since changed hands but I don't think changes with the stairs were made. It now is a karate school that isn't up to code; the stairs still exist. The stairs are in the side of the building and cannot be easily seen. Stairs just don't work for people like me, i.e., people in wheelchairs. So does this mean that people like me can't go to this establishment? I think not. They didn't have any problem taking my money, but they have allowed putting people's safety at risk, so they can make more money. I recently revisited this building to see if changes were made; they have not. The sign is still up saying it's a bar, but it's a karate school. Something smells a little fishy to me.

One prime example of needed accessibility is the Bank of the West building on Central/San Mateo. While the building is being used for a wide variety of purposes, a significant number of its offices on the top floor are used to provide help or assistance to individuals with disabilities. Having worked at Long Term Services for a number of years now, I have experienced this accessibility problem first hand. The word handicapped bothers some; it is what it is to me. I think this issue is here to stay. It's not something that some doctor can medicate and make everything warm and fuzzy. It's a change we all have to make. God knows who can handle being disabled, and who is going to get scared, and not deal with anything that is new to them.

If we are the kind of country that we say we are, it is time for us to take the bull by the horns and stand up for what we supposedly believe in. Disability has been pushed to the forefront by James Brady, President Reagan's press secretary. I just hope and pray that people will wake up and broaden their horizons. You can learn so much from a disabled person.