

Enabled to Succeed

Everyone can live and learn with braille books and curb cuts on campus

By D. A. Barsotti '79

D. A. Barsotti '79 is a freelance writer who lives in Franklinville.

Just inside the automatic doors of the Student Recreation Center, Dennis Ledger '97 approached the counter to present his membership card. But the I.D. check was just a formality. Before he could pull out his card, members of the staff rushed over to welcome him back. Sheepishly, Ledger apologized for not staying in touch while he tended to health problems over the past months. Upstairs in the fitness area, Ledger got the same reception as, one by one, the regulars stopped their exercise routines to welcome him back. Maneuvering his wheelchair around familiar territory, he took time to catch up with friends and expressed his eagerness to get back to his own routine.

"The Rec Center is a place I have always felt welcome," Ledger said, noting that most gyms don't have accessible fitness equipment or the support he gets here. Socialization and exercise. It's just the ticket he needs now after putting in his hours as a computer program analyst at a local company. It was just the ticket he needed as a student, with his courses in business administration and computer science and his involvement in the Management Information Systems Club.

Tamie Amoroso '04 has visited the Rec Center a few times in her first semester and is almost ready to add it and other diversions to her schedule. "This year I have focused on academics, but next year I would like to try to get more involved," she said. Her course schedule is compressed into the early hours of the day to accommodate the routine she requires to maintain her health.

In a wheelchair and with limited upper-body movement, Amoroso, a freshman, has discovered that college life is quite a change from high school days. "Not only is the work harder," she com-



Dennis Ledger '97 uses the shoulder press on the Rec Center's universal Nautilus, constructed without benches to accommodate users in wheelchairs. Pictured on page one, junior Sara Brines uses the computer lab in the Student Center.

mented, "but the schedule makes it harder to make friends." Still, she added, she is proud of her independence as she makes her way around campus, and feels fairly comfortable with her classes as she works towards a degree in business and economics. "My advisor helped me find a major that will give me flexibility as I think about my future," Amoroso said.

Sharon Jackson '02 is thinking about the future, too. As a native Texan, coming to the East Coast was a challenge. But after difficulty with special services in her home state, she recalls, "A friend said, 'Why don't you come to school here?'" At Rowan, she found the reliable support she needed to pursue a college degree. Her goal of being in a profession to help others has earned her the distinction as the first blind student in Rowan's Special Education program. With her guide dog, Dolly, at her side and supportive professors, Jackson's future in education is within reach.

Ledger, Amoroso and Jackson represent a segment of the population at

Rowan Magazine

Volume 5, Number 2

Spring '00

Pages 34-38

Copyright ©2000

www.rowanmagazine.com

Rowan University who work, study and teach on campus despite the challenges of their disabilities. There are others—students, alumni, faculty, staff—whose presence on campus demonstrates Rowan's commitment to the needs of the disabled. It is their collaborative voice that will continue to remove barriers and raise awareness.

Breaking Down Barriers

The most visible example of Rowan's commitment is the Rec Center. The staff has cultivated an atmosphere of sensitivity and awareness. Dave Hagedorn '00, a certified staff member and building manager at the center, explains that many barriers might prevent a person from coming through the doors. "Barriers can be mental, physical or emotional," he said. "Previous experience, poor self-image or negative feelings can prevent people from trying." He added that the staff doesn't differentiate between the "barriers" but strives to find accommodations to fit the needs of the individual.

"It is our job to enhance the experience for anyone who comes to the Rec Center," Hagedorn said, "beginning with the first step through the doors." The staff is happy to answer questions, give information, point out the features that are accessible to those with disabilities, introduce the Center's fitness experts and be available for encouragement.

The Rec Center's accommodating environment is no accident. Thoughtful planning created an accessible facility, from the inclusion of a special lift at poolside, to handicap-accessible elevators, to the specialized fitness equipment. "The University had the foresight to realize that physically disabled people would want to work out," said Laura Schwanger '94. "And they had the foresight to seek out someone who could provide correct input, rather than having an able-bodied person decide what was best for a disabled person." Schwanger, an accomplished athlete who participates in wheelchair competitions across the country, consulted with planners about the layout of the indoor track and about



A visit to New Jersey to pick up her guide dog, Dolly, started Sharon Jackson '02 on the road to earning a degree at Rowan. Jackson takes notes in class with a braille device and navigates the campus with Dolly at her side.

the design of a weight station that would benefit physically challenged individuals.

The Idea of Access

The idea of accessibility is becoming firmly planted at Rowan, according to Sociology Professor Tony Sommo. "There are steps being taken to comply with the mandates to make the school accessible," he said. Though Sommo felt that the campus lagged behind other schools when he arrived here in 1992, he acknowledged that progress has been made in terms of programs, activities and architectural improvements.

Sommo organizes Rowan's Disability Awareness Day, a community effort dedicated to promote sensitivity and build appreciation for the challenges disabled individuals face. His insights have become valuable to students in the Sociology Department and to students in other disciplines.

A team of engineering students came to Sommo for advice as they planned their design for a "smart cane" [see story on page 9]. "Professor Sommo encouraged us to consider things that we couldn't experience ourselves, like object perception and noise blanketing," related one of the engineering students. Their engineering project is on the drawing board thanks to Sommo's willingness to share the challenges he has faced since he

lost his sight in childhood.

Another person in a position to offer insight and make a difference on campus is Director of the Student Center Gerry Looney '73, '75. He offers support to both disabled and able-bodied populations. As an active member of the President's Committee on Persons with Disabilities (PCPD), Looney addresses the need for continued improvements. "The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is very definitive. There is a timeline: when you do a self-evaluation, when you have to have everything in place," he said. "We are not trying to say that we have met that, but what we have done is to improve our situation tremendously. The goal is to accommodate whatever needs are there."

Whatever it Takes

Looney can make long-term observations about the progress the University has made. Wheeling around campus as he pursued a B.A. in Elementary Education and an M.A. in Student Personnel Services, he had to negotiate not only a Bunce Hall without an elevator but also an aging campus with plenty of physical barriers. "We have made monumental changes since 1973," he said, adding that the eradication of barriers and problems is the ultimate goal, but elevators do break down

and automatic doors may fail to open. He is realistic about the process of change: "We want to minimize the deficiencies."

"There are going to be times when you run into difficulties on campus," admitted Melissa Smith '92,'94,'97. Smith, who has cerebral palsy, is currently working toward her Ed.D. She quickly learned that there are many people at Rowan who will do whatever it takes to provide disabled individuals with a safe and positive experience. The Offices of Administration, Public Safety, Specialized Services, and Residence Life have been very receptive to her needs over the years, whether it is a gate key for access to handicap parking, a computer for her dorm or safe transportation in icy weather. "If someone is new to campus, they won't know all the resources that are available," Smith said, commenting that her experience demonstrates how far Rowan will go to be supportive. "The most important thing is to learn to ask for what you need."

According to Smith, Rowan has always been there to say "Yes, we can do that for you." She enrolled in 1988, and since then, the campus has been transformed in ways that benefit everyone, Smith says. She recalls the days when special keys were required to operate elevators and the narrow sidewalk along Rt. 322 forced many pedestrians to detour onto the grass or into the road.

"In the 12 years I've been here, I have seen many improvements," she said.

Many improvements began when the ADA was signed into law nearly 10 years ago, according to Richard Williams, assistant to the president and chair of the PCPD. "We received funding to build ramps, widen doors, create handicap-accessible restrooms, upgrade elevators and make other changes to provide a user-friendly campus," he said.

This work has been done in stages, with improvements to second and third floors now on the drawing board, Williams added. But some things are not as obvious as missing handrails or physical obstructions, as one complaint from

a distraught football fan proved. The wheelchair-bound fan made the very long trip to the restroom, only to find it inaccessible. When it was brought to the committee's attention, they immediately pushed to obtain closer, handicap-accessible facilities for the athletic complex. "We are still struggling to change things," admitted Williams.

Making the necessary ADA improvements is but one of the priorities of the Department of Facilities; fulfilling requests from the PCPD is another. The PCPD, open to all who have concerns about campus accessibility issues, tries to accommodate those who present their needs, according to Jim Lovegrove '82, director of capital plans. In his previous capacity as director of facilities at Rowan, he saw to the acquisition of taller desks that will accommodate wheelchairs, chairs with elongated writing arms, a sign-making machine to create markers with pictographs and Braille, and hearing-impaired devices for campus auditoriums and for students to borrow on an as-needed basis. "One of our newest renovations is now compliant," Lovegrove said. "Savitz Hall, a kind of one-stop-shop, has been made accessible for all students to visit the Offices of the Registrar, Financial Aid, Career and Academic Planning and other resources."

Wish Lists

Amoroso and Jackson will benefit from these and future improvements and acquisitions. Jackson even has a wish list for assistive technology devices like a special scanner and a specially-equipped computer. Jeffrey Ellis '01 has a wish list, too: voice-activated computer software.

Ellis expects to graduate with a B.A. in history and certification in secondary education. He has difficulty writing, and though he often gets notes from his classmates, he requires some assistance when taking tests. The Office of Specialized Services provides a reader to help with this task.

Eileen Parker, former director of spe-

cialized services, was able to offer that kind of support to disabled students. Don Wardlow '87 recalled the importance of the Office of Specialized Services as a resident on campus. Blind from birth, Wardlow could count on Parker's help to order books, arrange class schedules and handle other concerns. Though Parker retired in December, she established a tradition of care and concern that will continue to benefit the disabled population at Rowan.

To make even greater strides, Rowan President Donald Farish announced the creation of a new position, director of services for disabled students. This appointment will provide a single office to focus exclusively on meeting the needs of students with physical limitations or learning disabilities. He added that this will allow the campus to better perceive where the needs remain to be met, and the means to resolve them expediently. "It is very clear that we have both an ethical and legal obligation to meet the needs of students with disabilities," Farish said, "and I want to be sure that we are doing that in every way possible."

Doing Something Right

Amid the buzz in the Rec Center, there is a steady rhythm of activity. The young intermingling with the not-so-young, the fit with those getting fitter, the able-bodied with the challenged. The staff members circulate, offering encouragement, applauding effort.

The scene is an affirmation that they are doing something right at the Rec Center. Hagedorn and the staff know their mission. "Accessibility has and will be a paramount concern to us at the Rec Center," he said. "We feel successful when we see people using our buildings and our programs. We feel even more successful when we are able to take down some of the barriers, physical or emotional, that people face."

That's a sentiment Rowan University seeks to embrace as it welcomes all who come to its campus. ■