

# Accessibility Designers Should Call on Experts

By Martin Toombs  
Southern Tier Editor

Ithaca — Lawsuits, government regulations and public awareness have vastly increased the number of buildings and public facilities which are accessible to the handicapped.

But Susan Srnka, a secretary at Cornell University's Gannett Clinic, can tell of instances where her perspective as a person confined to a wheelchair has given her insights building designers have missed.



The Gannett Clinic has just undergone major renovation and addition, Miss Srnka said, and after she started work there last August, they would have her check out the provisions for wheelchairs as they constructed them.

Before starting at Cornell, she had worked for 12 years at the Tompkins County Hospital, which moved into an entirely new building earlier in 1980. The hospital's builders were more concerned with meeting state accessibility standards than they were in making the building accessible, Miss Srnka surmised. Some of the facilities, although apparently legally adequate, would pose problems for some wheelchair users, she said.

Miss Srnka, who has a car equipped with hand controls, also told of the time when the handicapped parking spaces at the hospital were full. She had to park at the far end of the parking lot. But there were curb cuts only by the handicapped parking spaces, and so she had to wheel herself the full length of the parking lot.

A Spina Bifida patient, she attended Ithaca City Schools, starting work at the hospital soon after graduation. As a youngster, she had spent 13 months in the Shriner's Hospital in Philadelphia, getting a variety of operations to deal with the birth defect which affects the spine, and, in her case, the lower spine which makes her unable to walk. While at the Shriner's, she received schooling from a teacher in the hospital who received assignments from her Ithaca teachers.

Thirteen months is a long time for a child to spend away from home, but Miss Srnka says, "I'm glad I went through it," noting that in addition to the surgery she needed, she had a "growing experience" being around children who had such severe problems. It was an education she feels would have benefited many other teenagers.

"I may not look physically normal, but in my mind I am," she said, as she hasn't known what it is to walk. That attitude



SUSAN SRNKA

means that at times she says things which surprise people. Recently she told her co-workers she would "walk out of the room," something which, to her, she said, was not strange.

After high school, when she was looking for a job, she had to restrict her applications to employers in buildings that she could get into. She came away from the job search feeling that at times it was her wheelchair which didn't get the job. Describing one man who suddenly retracted what he had told her about hiring a secretary, she noted that she "ran into several things like that."

She got a job at the Tompkins County Hospital, where she worked as a medical records clerk. She now does similar work at Cornell, and in addition, serves as a personal secretary to an orthopedic surgeon.

Her fellow workers, at the hospital and at Cornell, accepted her wheelchair, she said, and her handicap really isn't an issue. The only difficulty it causes, she said, is when she is unable to reach some materials she needs.

She learned to drive at 21, ordering hand controls through the mail. A friend taught her to use the controls, and her mother taught her to drive. The controls don't make the car impossible for others to drive; recently she and her mother traveled to Massachusetts to visit relatives. They used her car, and took turns driving.

Miss Srnka also has a special perspective on inflation. Her newest wheelchair cost \$565; since then the price has risen to more than \$700. She pays for the chairs herself and doesn't even know if some program would provide one for her. She pays for them out of "stubborn pride," she admitted.

She also has helped wage a battle with the state. At one time, wheelchairs were considered a "luxury" in state law, and therefore covered by sales tax. She wrote letters to legislators in protest, as apparently did many others; they are now tax exempt.

Another place where provisions for the handicapped haven't been thought through is at the Pyramid Mall. The mall provides several handicapped parking spaces but none at the theater entrance, the only one open when the late movies let out, Miss Srnka noted.

As for buildings she wishes she could get into, first on her list is Immaculate Conception Church. Most Sundays she doesn't get to Mass, she said; when she does, she and her mother go to Holy Cross, Freeville, where it is much easier to get in.

She also is unable to get into the post office, and she noted that it took three people to push her up the too-steep ramp at the local library. Once she was to appear at a hearing in the county courthouse, an inaccessible building recently the target of a successful lawsuit by a local man with a wheelchair. Their suggestions, she said, was that the hearing being conducted in the parking lot. It was the middle of winter.

Miss Srnka lists the places she can't enter matter-of-factly, accepting the reality without anger. But acknowledging the cost of elevators and lifts, she criticized surveys to determine how many would use such equipment. Such buildings should be accessible, she said, without a requirement for an arbitrary number of people who would use them.

Despite the problems, "I wouldn't be happy if I weren't working," she said, and "I don't understand people who want to sit around and not do anything."

Considering the fact that she may have been able to avoid ever working, Miss Srnka admitted that some friends question how she manages. But she wonders how they, with jobs and children, manage. She did offer the comment that some people with handicaps end up with "more gumption."

## What Is Spina Bifida?

Spina Bifida (SPY-nah BIF-i-duh) is a spinal defect occurring early in a unborn child's development. According to the Greater Rochester Spina Bifida Association, "The spinal cord does not form into a tube, as it should, and damage is done to the nerve fibers.

the lower end of the spinal column, control of legs, feet, bladder and bowels can be affected in varying degrees, ranging from mild weakness to complete paralysis."

A common condition that occurs along with Spina Bifida is hydrocephalus. This results in fluid from the spinal column collecting inside the brain and resulting in an enlarged head. This malady can usually be controlled through surgery.

"Along with this one or more of the spinal vertebrae fail to close completely and leave an opening in the spine. Since this usually occurs at

## Ithaca Dance-a-thon Will Support MDA

Ithaca — A 30-hour dance-a-thon with a goal of raising \$15,000 for the Muscular Dystrophy Association will begin at 7 p.m., Friday, April 10, in Lynah Rink on the

Cornell University campus. Open to the general public, the event is sponsored by the Panhellenic Council and the Interfraternity Conference at Cornell.

All participants will receive prizes but the grand prize of a vacation at Caesar's Boardwalk Regency Hotel/Casino in Atlantic City, NJ, will go to the couple that dances the full 30 hours and raises the most money.

details are available in the lobby of Willard Straight Hall and at the Panhellenic Offices at 210 Willard Straight Hall.

In addition to records, a series of bands will play. There will be a cover charge for spectators and non-competing dancers.

Dancers will raise money by getting sponsors to give pledges for each hour danced. Sponsor sheets and dance

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## Deaths

### Anna Stephan

Auxiliary Bishop Dennis W. Hickey presided at the Mass of Christian Burial for Anna Stephan at St. Ann's Home March 23. Mrs. Stephan died Friday, March 20, 1980, at the age of 98.

A native of Brooklyn, Mrs. Stephan and her family moved to Rochester 48 years

ago and settled in Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish.

She is survived by a daughter, Mrs. Anna Eckert; a son, Martin Stephan; one sister, Mrs. Emma delaTorre; seven grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren.

### Sister Margaret Ryan

Mass of Christian Burial for Sister Margaret Ryan (formerly Sister Martin de Porres) of the Sisters of St. Joseph was celebrated March 20, 1981, in the Motherhouse Chapel of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The principal celebrant and homilist was Father Donald Schwab, chaplain of Rochester General Hospital. Assisting were: Msgr. William H. Shannon, Father James M. Moynihan, Father Winifried Kellner, Father Brian Murphy, O.Carm., and Father Vincent McDonough, S.J.

Auburn; and for one year in St. Agnes High School, Rochester. She then taught in St. Augustine, Rochester, for two years, and Holy Apostles, Rochester, for one year.

In 1974, she began to teach at Nazareth Academy which she continued to do until this present year. Sister Margaret Ryan knew that she had a special gift for teaching and she enjoyed her relationship with her students and with members of the faculty.

Sister Margaret entered the Sisters of St. Joseph from St. Andrew's Parish, Rochester, in 1950. For the first 12 years of her teaching career, she taught in various parish schools in the diocese of Rochester, among them, St. Ambrose, St. Bridget, Mother of Sorrows, all of Rochester; and St. Alphonsus in Auburn. From 1965 to 1970, she taught at Mt. Carmel High School in

Sister Margaret is survived by her mother, Mrs. Margaret Ryan; her sister, Mrs. Joseph (Anne) Doyle; and two brothers, Edward J. Ryan of Rochester and John J. Ryan of Brandon, Fla.; also nieces and nephews.

Interment was in the Sisters' section of Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, March 21.



## Portrait Available

In conjunction with the International Year of the Disabled Person the Courier-Journal has available a limited number of portraits of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The portraits are available to handicapped individuals or their families free of charge.

To order a portrait write to the Courier-Journal, Dept. 19, 114 S. Union St., Rochester, N.Y. 14607.

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