

Disabled

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the board of directors of a youth group at Holy Name of Jesus in Rochester from 1983-84.

"I wanted to get involved in the parish, and the youth minister approached me and asked me (to join)," recalled Ann Kurz, 28, who has cerebral palsy. "I helped to put on events. I had to coordinate the teens," Kurz said.

Despite the youth minister's good intentions, Kurz said she never felt the teenagers accepted her. She believes much of the problem stemmed from the teens' difficulty in understanding her speech, which is slow and somewhat slurred.

"(The teenagers) really didn't know what to do when they didn't understand me, and they acted scared of me," she said, noting that she doesn't mind repeating a statement if her listener doesn't understand it at first.

"I would call people on the phone and ask them, for example, to make a poster, and they would say, 'OK,' but then I would hear from someone else ... that (the teenagers) didn't understand what I wanted."

Kurz said that when she asked the youth minister to help her resolve the communication problems with the teens, she was told only to "try harder."

Although she was invited to work with the group the next year, Kurz declined. She currently does not participate in any parish activities. "I want to be involved, and I'm very hesitant about asking," she said.

Kurz's experience attests to the fact that physical access to a parish is meaningless

without a corresponding social access based on attitudinal change. To help parishes bring about such change, Dechaine's department has worked in the past with the diocesan Department of Continuing Education to sponsor workshops on the disabled for parish staff members.

Kristan spoke at one such workshop last April during which he related his experiences to the 110 parish staff members in attendance. Both Kurz and Kristan have spoken at workshops sponsored by To Reach and Inform about Developmental Disabilities, TRIADD, a community-education program of the Health Association of Rochester.

TRIADD has sent several speakers to parishes and Catholic schools throughout the diocese, and recently sponsored an assembly on the disabled for students at Aquinas Institute, according to Betty Morton, TRIADD's program director.

Kurz said she tells her listeners that "everyone is unique and I think they have to look at (disabled people) as individuals ... Everyone has a handicap, and some are more visible than others."

William McGrath, who currently belongs to St. Joseph's Parish, echoed Kurz's comments as he talked about his experiences serving on the parish council at St. Thomas More in Rochester, where he was a parishioner for 15 years.

McGrath, who is confined to a wheelchair by multiple sclerosis, eagerly accepted an invitation to serve on the council when it was extended in 1983.

"I got involved because, as a result of my illness, I felt a real calling to relay my experiences as a disabled person and, by my presence in various areas of the church, to convince myself that I was capable of service to other people," he said.

McGrath chose action not words to spread the word about the capacity of disabled people to contribute to the church. "I wasn't really a terribly political person in terms of preaching about disabilities ...," he said. "I think (the council members) were really pleased I had something to offer."

People with disabilities want opportunities, not sympathy, McGrath remarked, noting that most disabled people resent receiving kind treatment simply because they are disabled. "There are just as many jerks in wheelchairs as (there are) nice people," he said.

Dechaine echoed McGrath's sentiments, and asserted that once a handicapped person receives an opportunity to serve the church, he or she must make the most of that chance. She pointed to her own experience as chairman of the school board of St. Ambrose in Rochester in the mid-1980s, when she didn't allow her blindness to thwart her in carrying out her duties.

"I took notes in Braille," Dechaine said of the school board's meetings. "I wrote the agenda in Braille. I had a Braille slate so I could write whatever I wanted."

Kristan has made similar efforts to learn the folk-group's songs at rehearsals. "I take a microcassette recorder with me. I tape the songs and memorize them at home," he commented.

Kristan's efforts are appreciated by his fellow folk-group members. "It's kind of humbling to me to be with (the Kristans)," said Bob Sayre. "It just gives you a little more incentive, a little push."

"(Kristan) has soloed before, and that's a very beautiful experience," Hendrickson said. "We love having him."

The folk-group members' comments

point to the ultimate point disabled Catholics want to make to their church — the more the church involves them, the more the church will gain. The U.S. bishops said as much in their 1978 pastoral letter.

"When we think of handicapped people in relation to ministry, we tend to automatically think of doing something for them," the document stated. "We do not reflect that they can do something for us and with us."

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