

MOVIE

on the

STORY BY
MIKE LATONA

PHOTOS BY
ANDREA DIXON

To Mom With Love

We now have flowering plants in many varieties

- Annuals
- Perennials
- Roses

10 inch
Flowering Baskets

\$12.99
each

2 for \$25.00



Specializing in
Hanging Baskets

Bauman's

Farm and Garden Center
1340 Five Mile Line Road
(Corner Plank Rd.) Penfield NY

585-671-2820

Open 7 days • Weekdays 8 am-8 pm
Weekends till 6 pm

REASONABLE PRICES!!
Come visit our greenhouses



Steve Bale (left) "kneels" in prayer with other teens in front of the Rochester Public Library in downtown Rochester during the Diocesan Youth Convention April 6.

'He's right there in the middle of everything'

You might expect folks to cut Steve Bale some slack because he gets around in a wheelchair. Maybe, but that doesn't exclude him from occasional razzing by his pals at St. Margaret Mary Parish in Apalachin.

Youth-group members claim that strange things seem to happen when Steve is along on trips: bad weather while driving, and security alarms inexplicably going off in bedrooms. Then there was the salad incident, in which things got kind of messy when Steve tried shaking a bottle of dressing.

"You have to keep your thumb on the lid!" Stephanie Morrison admonished, laughingly.

"It was Caesar salad," recalled Felicia Roberts, 16.

"Steve has trouble with salad," John Wunder, 18, chimed in.

Steve loves giving grief right back to his peers, claiming they only hang out with him in order to get preferred seating at events and parking in handicapped-accessible spots.

"They use me," Steve said cheerfully.

"We mooch," admitted Stephanie, 17.

All kidding aside, the teens' true feelings toward Steve were evident during the Diocesan Youth Convention in early April. Throughout the weekend, Steve's friends rarely strayed from his side as they visited several parts of downtown Rochester. Once, they neared an auditorium entrance at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center. Because the area was not handicapped-accessible, Steve had to go down a winding hallway and through a side entrance. Rather than arrange to meet him inside, his friends stuck right by him, accompanying him along his detour path.

The teens even showed their sensitivity during their hi-jinks, said Peter Morrison, 17, who is Stephanie's twin brother. During the weekend, he noted, "We said, 'Hey, let's go play on the escalator ... oh, Steve can't do that, so let's play on the elevator.'"

Being part of the action is just the way Steve likes it. He accomplishes this by being extroverted, saying that's somewhat of a necessity given his physical limitations.

"I can't be quiet. If I'm quiet, I fade into the background," he explained.

Steve, 18, has spina bifida, a birth defect that results when the spine fails to close correctly during the first month of pregnancy. Steve explained that the nerves to his legs never grew properly, so he has never walked.



Steve, a parishioner of St. Margaret Mary's in Apalachin, listens to a speaker outside the library.

Spina bifida affects approximately one out of every 1,000 newborns in the United States. Due to paralysis stemming from spinal-cord damage, people with spina bifida may require surgeries and other medical procedures. Steve has had eight major surgeries, forcing him to miss school for several months at a time.

"I'm there, and for half a year I disappear," Steve remarked. Once, he recalled, his Spanish class from Vestal High School sent a bunch of get-well cards, all written in Spanish.

Despite his medical setbacks, Steve eyes the future with enthusiasm. A fifth-year student at Vestal, he's due to graduate this June. His next goal is learning how to drive by using hand controls. In the fall Steve will attend Broome Community College in Binghamton, where he'll work toward a possible career in urban development and city planning.

"It might give me a unique perspective being a person with disabilities," he said.

Steve has attended programs sponsored by the Spina Bifida Association of America. He's also adamant about blending in with people who can walk, as reflected by his involvement with St. Margaret Mary's youth group. In addition, Steve has been a regular participant in diocesan teen events. "The diocese is very youth-friendly and they're getting better at including people with disabili-

ties," he commented.

Thanks to his electric wheelchair, Steve moves quickly from place to place and usually has little trouble keeping up with the crowd. At one point during the Diocesan Youth Convention, his friends stepped warily across a patch of ice while going down Main Street in Rochester. Meanwhile, Steve spun his wheelchair across the surface exclaiming, "Oh, doughnuts, they're fun!"

And, at youth gatherings where teens sprawl on the floor, Steve prefers to slide out of his wheelchair and join them. "I don't like sitting above everybody," he said.

His efforts to fit in impress St. Margaret Mary's Megan Cooney, 17. "Steve is not quiet, as we all know. He's right there in the middle of everything," she said. "If I were him, I don't think I'd be able to be so outgoing."

On the other hand, Steve faces numerous challenges that don't exist for people who have use of their legs. For example, he said, "Going to the bathroom is a chore." Despite his generally cheery outlook, he acknowledges that he's become depressed at various times — "Ask my parents," he remarked — wondering why such a burden has fallen on his shoulders.

Another challenge is getting people to communicate comfortably with him. "I get two different reactions: They ignore me, or they talk about their own problems," Steve said. Or, he added, they may make light of his disability: "Big guy" — I love that one."

He also doesn't wish for pity: "I've seen some people bend over backwards for me, which is really not necessary," he said. All he really wants, he emphasized, is "to be treated like everybody else."

Steve talked about these issues during a presentation, "Taking Off Our Masks," he gave at a diocesan teen retreat in mid-April. His talk centered around not wanting to use his disability as a mask, "to try not to let that influence the way I live my life."

The fact that Steve served as a peer leader on that retreat and is active in so many other areas of his life shows he's already accomplishing that goal.

"He takes his life day by day and keeps going at it," Megan said.

"Steve doesn't give up," added Michael Greiner, 16.

Who knows? With this kind of perseverance, Steve might even get his salad struggles under control.

By
St.
br
ma
St.
Ka
wh
pr
dic
an
sha
ma
istr
S
tha
fess
nee
por
war

o
St.
C.
R.
N.Y.

Yo
ne
Ru
dr
—