

IF DISABLED ONCE MEANT INVISIBLE IT NOW MEANS DIALOGUE

By Susan Fleming Stroyd

For most Mt. Lebanon residents, an average "day off" might mean a quick stop at the grocery store before a morning dentist appointment, then a haircut after lunch followed by a stop at the elementary school to watch the third grade play, next a visit to the municipal building to argue about a parking ticket, and finally, dinner out at a restaurant before taking in a movie.

For people with mobility impairments — those disabled by injury, birth defect, illness, or age — accomplishing even a single item on that schedule may mean extensive planning followed by frustration — if the task can be completed at all.

"You have to scout out the restaurant, the theater, the store or whatever ahead of time to see about curb cuts, bathrooms, doorways and so on, and then you have to arrive about an hour ahead of time to get a close parking space if there is no handicapped parking, or to get the handicapped space before someone else does," explains Jule Lewis of Crystal Drive, mother of 11-year-old Don, who uses crutches and a wheelchair because of cerebral palsy. "Even at Donnie's age, he'll say, 'Mom, please don't carry me.'"

And the situation is worse for adults, who are usually too heavy and too proud to be carried to their destinations.

Statistics show that one out of seven people living in Allegheny County has a permanent physical or mental disability. Although it is difficult to assess exactly how many Mt. Lebanonites' disabilities result in mobility impairment, Jim Steedle of Lindenwood Drive, a national

director of the National Spinal Cord Injury Association, estimates that several hundred such people live here and says the number is closer to 1000 if elderly residents with serious physical disabilities are included in the figure.

"We have to think of lack of accessibility not just as a problem of the handicapped, but as a community problem," says Morton Bregman of Parkview Drive, vice president of the Vocational Rehabilitation Center. "We are an aging community."

Architecture compounds problems

For the many people who use canes, crutches, walkers, wheelchairs or amigros (motorized carts), Mt. Lebanon's vintage architecture compounds problems posed by Western Pennsylvania's rolling terrain. They learn early on that independent living depends on winning a constant battle with high curbs, steep stairs, narrow doorways, small bathrooms, cracked pavements and inaccessible telephones, drinking fountains and elevator buttons.

"For a disabled person, living in Mt. Lebanon stinks," reports wheelchair athlete Barbie Baum, 26, of Academy Place, who spent her teenage years here after becoming paralyzed as a result of an automobile accident, then went to college in the heart of the midwestern flatlands.

In addition to architectural and geological barriers, Mt. Lebanon's disabled face obstacles created by human ignorance or insensitivity — slippery, unshoveled sidewalks, snow piles which render handicapped van

ramps useless, able-bodied citizens who hog the few and far between handicapped parking spaces, self-service gas stations lacking provisions for serving the disabled, car washes that won't wash the car with the driver in it, and people who help them whether they need it or not.

"Once I got crossed back across an intersection I had just crossed," says Steedle, 39, a quadriplegic as a result of a swimming accident five years ago. "I kept protesting that I didn't need help, but the person wouldn't listen." He offers the anecdote with the gentle humor that characterizes many disabled people. Overly solicitous bystanders are, after all, among the least of his problems.

A more absurd situation which disabled people say they encounter with some frequency is the friendly bystander who assumes that anyone in a wheelchair is also mentally retarded. "People talk to me and ignore my husband," complains Deborah Cardamone of Rockwood Avenue, whose husband Tom, a quadriplegic, is currently completing a master's degree.

"People will see my son in a wheelchair and then ask me, 'What's wrong with him?' as if he can't hear or understand them," adds Jule Lewis. "I've taught him to pipe up, 'I have cerebral palsy.'"

"We wouldn't have survived the past five years without a good sense of humor and an appreciation of the ridiculous," confirms Beth O'Brien of Mayfair Drive, the mother of 19-year-old John, who is head injured and uses a

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BILL METZGER PHOTO

"I can't get over the curbs myself," laments Barbie Baum, who is not used to accepting defeat. Despite her disability, she has ridden motorcycles and horses, won medals in swimming and track in international competition and earned an M.B.A. in marketing research. Curb cuts will be completed in the Washington Road business district this year.



"Mom, please don't carry me."

—DON LEWIS



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—MORT BREGMAN, VICE PRESIDENT
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION CENTER



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—BETH O'BRIEN



"When I could leap over a curb or run up a flight of steps, I never gave a thought to accessibility —and I'm a nurse!"

—MAUREEN O'REILLY

Disabled *cont.*

wheelchair since being hit by a car five years ago. O'Brien, a widow, is her son's primary caregiver, and some of their least dignified, most trying situations — in locker rooms, dressing rooms or restrooms — have resulted from that fact. The pair has managed to keep smiling, but their experiences have turned Beth into a self-described "fighter." She is presently serving as president of the Pittsburgh Chapter of the National Head Injuries Foundation.

"But not everyone is a fighter like I am," she points out. Some disabled people simply give up and stay home. Others struggle quietly, counting on their own ingenuity and perseverance to surmount obstacles. Says Maureen O'Reilly of Pinewood Drive who has used crutches or a wheelchair for much of the last eight years because of rheumatoid arthritis, "Disabled people are typically passive." She objects to the journalistic practice of referring to disabled people as "victims" of cerebral palsy or as "suffering" from multiple sclerosis because she thinks it promotes that image of passivity.

Speaking out

Like their counterparts in other parts of the country, however, Mt. Lebanon's disabled citizens are increasingly speaking out and fighting back at barriers they believe obstruct their right to participate fully in the social, political and economic process of the community.

"If it gets too difficult to go places, the temptation is to stay home," says O'Reilly, a fortyish mother of two who has not let her disability keep her from taking her youngsters to the park, the library, the swimming pool, "but then you lose so much of the quality and joy of living. To think that a concrete curb or flight of stairs could stop a person from contributing is crazy —it's mind-boggling!"

O'Reilly was part of the reason Mt. Lebanon commissioners changed new commissioner June Delano's January swearing in ceremony to the first floor of the barrier-ridden municipal building. Both O'Reilly, who worked on the campaign, and Delano's elderly mother wanted to attend the ceremony.

Delano has pledged to be a voice on the commission in support of the needs of the disabled, a step that falls short of Osage Drive resident Diane Winnecour's notion of the ideal. "If the commissioner said I spent one day going around town in a wheelchair, that's all the education they'd need," says Winnecour, who was the motivator for the wheelchair seating area the school district installed last fall at the high school stadium.

Winnecour, wheelchair-bound by multiple sclerosis for the past several years, has a theory as to why Mt. Lebanon, so forward thinking on most issues, is no-better-no-worse than most places when it comes to accessibility. "Mt. Lebanon is a jock town, a very healthy, athletic town. Disabled people are disturbing to other people. They don't want to see them."

In cooperation with the Mt. Lebanon Community Relations Board, Winnecour and a number of disabled citizens are working towards developing a cohesive interest group with clearly-defined goals. They hope to convince public officials, private business owners and their neighbors that physical and attitudinal barriers impede their productivity and their contribution to the community.

The board's major focus in 1984-85 was to meet with representatives of various religious, racial, age, ethnic and interest groups in the community to discuss the quality of life here as members of those groups perceive it. Winnecour was invited to address the board as a representative of the disabled community.

Lowest satisfaction

With the exception of teenagers, disabled citizens expressed the lowest degree of satisfaction with life in Mt. Lebanon. As a result, the board resolved to make seeking solutions to some of the expressed problems a top priority in the coming year. The annual Community Relations report targeted the Denis Theater, Sodin's restaurant and the municipal building as specific problems and pledged to work toward alleviating subtle forms of discrimination against the community's disabled citizens.

The board sent a letter to 10 community organizations which offer programs for children and young people, asking that special needs youngsters be included in existing programs or that special programs be developed for them. Since then, the Center for Theater Arts, which already runs a Saturday dance program for special education students, has indicated interest in expanding its program, the Boy Scouts have started a troop at Pathfinder School and the Mt. Lebanon Soccer Association has made a commitment to include special children in their program.

"We've reorganized the board this year and we're going to be more visible in the future," says chairman Marshall Gordon of Magnolia Place. "The disabled community viewed our invitation as a very positive step."

Continued on next page

Mt. Lebanonites who are interested in learning more about programming for special needs children are invited to contact Mary Howe, 344-5142, or Ann Kernan, 343-2464.

"Disabled people are disturbing to other people. They don't want to see them."

—DIANE WINNECOUR



"... We're going to be more visible this year."

—MARSHALL GORDON, CHAIRMAN
COMMUNITY RELATIONS BOARD



"Before I was injured I gave very little thought to barriers, because I saw very few people in wheelchairs."

—TOM CARDAMONE



"People talk to me and ignore my husband."

—DEBORAH CARDAMONE



"I won't patronize someone who makes it too difficult. There are enough others who have expressed a modicum of concern."

—JIM STEEDLE



Disabled *cont.*

Modifications applauded

Mobility-impaired residents applaud the board's commitment and the public and private architectural modifications that have been made in the community in recent years. They are optimistic about future plans and concede that fiscal restraints and lack of retroactive legislation regarding barrier removal make immediate and total accessibility impossible. But they enumerate many small but significant changes that could in the meantime help them live relatively "normal" lives.

Morton Bregman offers an example of an easy, affordable modification that made a difference. The Vocational Rehabilitation Center received a call from an employer who wanted to make light switches in his building accessible, but the lowest bid was \$300,000, far beyond his company's financial capability. Could the Center help? "We came up with a simple plan which involved drilling a hole through the toggle switch and attaching a stick," explains Bregman. "The person in the wheelchair could move the switch up and down using the stick and it only cost 30 cents."

"I hate to sound nitpicking, because I appreciate everything that has been done, but there's always room for improvement," says Jule Lewis. Her action plan involves keeping abreast of the issues and constantly writing informed, insistent, but polite letters to senators, congressmen and others in positions of power.

"You have to be assertive, but not angry, or you'll alienate people," says Maureen O'Reilly. "You have to always think of yourself as educating people." She understands that the able bodied need help in order to conceptualize the barriers mobility-impaired people encounter. "When I could leap over a curb or run up a flight of steps, I never gave a thought to accessibility — and I'm a nurse."

It has been two decades since legislators first responded to the needs of the disabled and specified minimum basic standards for accessibility. As laws have been refined and accessibility improved, especially in newer communities or in areas where flat terrain makes modifications few, cheap and simple, the handicapped have become more visible and their needs more clear. In mature communities like Mt. Lebanon, where most buildings predate construction standards for accessibility and hilly terrain makes mobility a problem for anyone who functions at less than 100 percent, less has been accomplished and public consciousness is lower.

Vicious cycle

Barbie Baum comments on the vicious cycle: "Handicapped people stay home because it's hard to navigate here, so the public doesn't recognize the need for accessibility because they rarely see handicapped people in public."

Tom Cardamone, a former Pitt gymnast who is a quadriplegic because of an accident in 1973, agrees with Baum: "Before I was injured, I gave very little thought to barriers because I saw very few people in wheelchairs. The average person does not ask himself what it would be like to walk in a disabled person's shoes."

School district and municipal officials are among those who have become better educated in the needs of the handicapped. They have been schooled through the excruciating budgetary process of allocating the funds for modifications necessary to bring local programs and facilities into compliance with state and federal law.

Twenty years ago in Pennsylvania, the Physically Handicapped Act first specified accessibility standards that would apply to "assembly, educational institutions and office buildings constructed in whole or in part by Commonwealth funds." The act also applies to department stores, theaters,

retail stores, sports arenas and restaurants that contain at least 2800 square feet of usable floor space. This law accounts for the accessibility of Hoover Elementary School, the addition to the senior high school and the Recreation Center, the only fully accessible public buildings in the municipality, all of which were constructed after the law was passed.

The 1965 law applied only to new construction, however. No existing public or private building was required to be made accessible, although later laws have forced public buildings to make some changes.

In 1973, Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, a "civil rights" statute which prohibits discrimination against otherwise qualified handicapped persons, required recipients of federal funds, which included the Pennsylvania Department of Education, to provide an "appropriate, free education" to all handicapped children. While the act did not require schools to provide a barrier-free environment, in many cases providing an "appropriate" education has necessitated removing barriers. That act and the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which instituted the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for handicapped children and the extensive "due process" procedures, precipitated most of the structural modifications the school district has made to existing facilities within the past decade.

Removing barriers

The municipality was not required to modify any existing facilities until 1984. At that time the Treasury Department issued regulations which would cut off federal revenue sharing funds to any municipality stated to receive more than \$25,000 in revenue sharing and which was adjudged to be discriminating against the handicapped. As in the case of the school district, the municipality was not told to make its buildings barrier-free, but it was required to make its programs and services equally accessible, which has necessitated removing barriers. In response, the commission followed the lead of the United Nations and declared the coming decade to be the "Decade of the Disabled," pledging to seek improvements for Mt. Lebanon's disabled in the areas of housing, building, education, employment, transportation and recreation. Under the supervision of Municipal Assistant Manager Steve Feller, policies, procedures and facilities were evaluated, targeted improvements were included in the budget and a transition plan to bring the municipality into compliance within three years was formulated.

The evaluation showed no discriminatory policies or record of discrimination against the handicapped

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"Cut Me a Break"

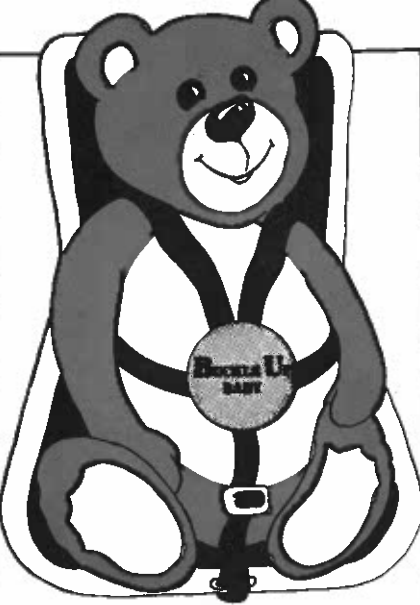
Most pedestrians are vaguely aware when an intersection curb has been sliced into and an area beginning about midpoint in the sidewalk smoothly ramped to the street. Eliminating the 6 to 8 inch vertical depth of curb edge allows passage by persons in wheelchairs, on crutches, or whose disability doesn't permit them to move up or down the equivalent of a step. Such adaptations determine for Mt. Lebanon's disabled citizens whether the hometown shopping areas are usable.

Though necessary, curb cuts are not cheap. The cost to retrofit an existing curb averages \$1000 per cut.

Mt. Lebanon's first cuts appeared about four years ago when Washington Square was built and new sidewalks built for it as well as those fronting the Municipal Building. Since then about two dozen more have appeared, nine or ten of them completed at little or no cost to the community in cooperation with utility companies, the Port Authority or private projects.

By year-end, the Washington Road business area "will be 90 percent complete," says Public Works Director James Harrod.

Next priority, Harrod says, will be other Mt. Lebanon business districts and major pedestrian crossings, such as the Washington Road/Castle Shannon Boulevard/Lebanon Avenue intersection.



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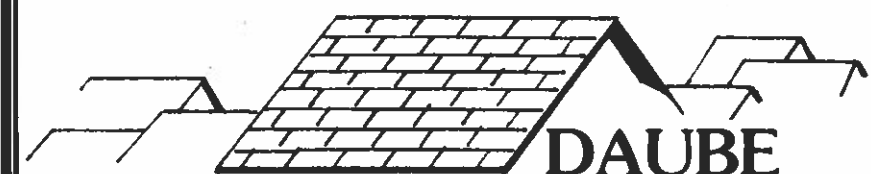
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Disabled *cont.*

in local government and also concluded that Mt. Lebanon has several programs specifically designed for the handicapped: the Port-A-Tel phone device that allows the deaf access to emergency services, the fire department's complete list of all invalids, the police department's crime prevention program for the handicapped and regular contributions to the South Hills Council on Aging Adults' transportation system.

As expected, the evaluation revealed that the newer the building, the better the accessibility, with the Rec Center, built in 1975, completely accessible, and the municipal building, with stairs to every level and no restroom facility for the handicapped, inaccessible by American National Standards Institute standards. It also highlighted a number of other barriers within the community.

The only relatively expensive and "iffy" item in the plan is the elevator, which would cost approximately \$186,000. The municipality has included half the cost of the elevator in this year's budget and has applied to the county for a matching grant for the remainder. Officials expect to have their grant request approved or denied this spring.

"Our plan does not specifically say that we will build an elevator. It says we will make our meeting rooms accessible," says Feller. "The money is in the budget and we will still attempt to make a reasonable accommodation, regardless of whether or not we get the matching grant. What is 'reasonable' could range from agreeing to carry people up the stairs, to ramping, to putting in a chair-type lift." If the municipality receives the grant, a restroom will also be made handicapped accessible.

Feller says the municipality is seeking input from disabled and elderly persons: "We want to hear from them. This plan only represents our best estimates of the needs as they apply to facilities

As expected, an evaluation of municipal facilities showed that the newer the building, the better the accessibility.

The resulting transition plan outlined the following improvements, all of which except the elevator have been or will be completed or underway by the end of this year, according to Public Works Director Jim Harrod: curb cuts in the main business district on Washington Road (followed by curb cuts in other areas of the community as funds become available); installation of a railing at the library; parking improvements, including designation of handicapped spaces and curb cuts, at the Recreation Center; an elevator or some other type of lift at the municipal building, and a new entrance to the municipal building. Although revenue sharing payments are expected to end in October of this year, Harrod says the work will continue on schedule.

"If citizens want things..."
"If the citizens want things, we have to make the changes whether the law requires it or not," explains Feller.

The only relatively expensive and "iffy" item in the plan is the elevator, which would cost approximately \$186,000.

improvements. There are probably many other small things that could be done that wouldn't cost much money."

The municipality has made other voluntary changes. Last summer, for example, a portable stair which helps a disabled person enter the water at the swimming pool, was welcomed by many residents (although one reported that the lifeguards had not been instructed as to how to use it). Municipal officials are also willing to make exceptions to rules, when feasible, if disabled people request a special "dispensation." For instance, those who complain that the ramp to the upper level of the Recreation Center is too long or too steep can get permission to drive to the top to discharge if they call ahead. The police can make special parking arrangements for events like the fireworks or concerts in the park where there is no convenient handicapped parking, if they know in advance. Municipal building employees have

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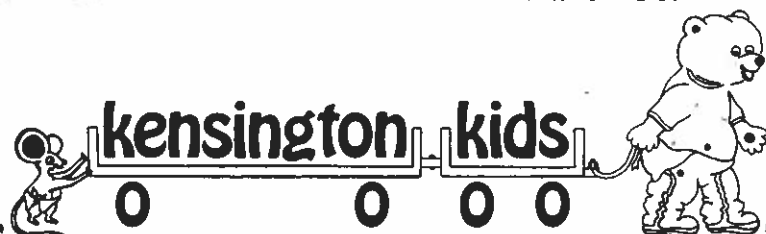
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Disabled cont.

orders to go down to the first floor to meet with anyone who cannot climb the long steep stairs.

The school district is also willing to meet disabled people's special needs. On-field parking is available for the disabled at sports events by prior arrangement. A handicapped visitor to the High School Fine Arts Theater can make special arrangements to enter the auditorium through the ground level dressing room.

Accessibility according to age

The schools, like the municipal facilities, are more or less accessible according to age. Most are accessible on some levels or in part. Only the high school and Mellon, which will close this year, have elevators. A major premise of the district's two-document transition plan which was approved by the state is that the district will take immediate action to comply when the need arises. According to Physical Plant Manager Dave Disque, this means that when a disabled child enrolls, the district automatically takes steps to insure that child's "free, equal and appropriate" education. Modifications could range from bringing a restroom up to standard to scheduling the child's classes in convenient locations. Since each handicapped child has an IEP and the right to due process, his parents or guardians have what amounts to veto power over any plans for modifications they consider "inappropriate."

"We might suggest that we could provide a better education for a handicapped child at Hoover School, which is completely accessible, but if the parent still wants to send the child to Markham, the onus is on us to make the necessary changes."

These modifications are costly. At present there are three physically disabled students in the district, one at Mellon and two at the high school. In the next year, says Disque, the district will spend approximately \$110,000 to install two chair-type lifts at the senior high school. These would eliminate detours outside now necessary for disabled students to reach the swimming pool or the lower levels of the fine arts building. In addition, the district is looking for a place to install a chair lift in the stair tower at Hoover School that would connect the auditorium/gym wing with the classroom portion of the building at a cost of about \$30,000.

A second major premise of the school district transition plan was that it would make modifications when the opportunity arose, meaning that if the district updates or remodels a portion of a building for some other reason, restrooms, doorways and stairs will be brought up to standard at that time. As a

result, the six elementary schools other than Hoover now have at least one handicapped stall in restrooms on accessible floors, and ramps have been installed at a number of single step exits throughout the district.

Katharine Hakala of Osage Road has been working with the school district for a decade to provide a safe, accessible environment for her daughter Leslie, 14, an honor student who cannot bend her knees and wears braces because she was born without some of the muscles in her legs. Hakala commends administrators for their efforts, but wishes at times the district would take a more proactive role. "They're very responsive when the need is pointed out — for instance, they did move the district chorus rehearsals from Markham to Foster, which is partially accessible —," she says, "but for a long time I think Leslie did without things she was entitled to because I didn't know the law well enough to ask for them."

With the help of the Developmental Disabilities Law Center, a publicly-funded organization located in downtown Pittsburgh, she has become better educated concerning her daughter's rights and has become more assertive. "We were sort of pioneers," she reflects. "I guess before Leslie started, all the disabled children went to Pathfinder School."

Other public sector targets cited by disabled residents include the post office, Jefferson field and the Main Park.

Suggestions

Other things in the public sector that disabled residents suggest might be improved included the post office — "The doors are too heavy for a person with limited upper body strength," Jefferson field — "There's no handicapped parking on field level," and the Main Park — "It would be nice if there was a gradual winding ramp that took you to various play and picnic areas."

They are more critical of private businesses, professional offices, restaurants and churches, many of which stymie the handicapped customer, client, patient or worshipper. Because of their size, age, or purpose, few such publicly-used spaces in Mt.

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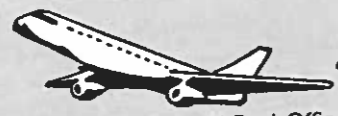
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Our Potato Bar!)*
*Available at Washington Rd. store only

Disabled *cont.*

Lebanon are regulated. Under the law, plans for any new construction of a restaurant, theater or other publicly-used building of 2800 square feet or more must be approved by the State Department of Labor and Industry, which insures plans comply with accessibility standards, before Mt. Lebanon can issue a building permit. The law applies only to new construction, however, which explains why Sodini's, which was considered "remodeling," was not required to install an elevator.

The disabled hope to convince doctors, dentists, hairdressers, boutique owners and restaurateurs to consider the needs of the mobility-impaired during the planning stages when implementing accessibility is relatively cheap. A doctor who builds an examination room large enough for a wheelchair to turn around in, a dentist who selects a chair with leg

who says she often feels "trapped" in Mt. Lebanon, recalls socializing, shopping and participating in every aspect of campus life like any other student at the University of Illinois' Champaign-Urbana campus. Beth O'Brien reports that her son, presently training at the Center for Comprehensive Services in Carbondale, Illinois at the edge of the University of Southern Illinois' accessible campus, is living a more "normal" life than he did here. "It's partly the cornfield terrain," she admits, "but it's also the mindset of the community. Even the waitresses are willing to take an extra few minutes to help a disabled person."

Mort Bregman is convinced that the most effective way to change attitudes and remove barriers is for disabled voters to exercise their power: "Elected officials are running a tight race. Their public sensitivity toward disabled people can garner them support."

Jim Steedle thinks consumer power can also further their cause and suggests disabled people should boycott establishments that are unresponsive to

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support for the person who lacks balance, the restaurant that allows enough space between tables to permit a paraplegic to remain in his wheelchair, significantly improve the quality of life for the disabled, they insist. (One local business commended for its effort was the Shop 'n' Save on Cochran Road, which has initiated a shopping and delivery service for a \$2 charge.) Several people were critical of local churches that make little effort to welcome the disabled. Only Southminster Presbyterian was mentioned as responsive.

Although houses of worship, business and professional associations, volunteer organizations and the elected officials are not solely responsible for the community's insensitivity, Mort Bregman believes they could take a greater leadership role. "We need to heighten the social conscience of the community," he says. "Maybe a church like Southminster could spearhead something on a community-wide basis."

Some communities apparently have been more successful than Mt. Lebanon in creating a friendly environment for their disabled citizens. Barbie Baum,

their needs. "I won't patronize someone who makes it too difficult," he says. "There are enough others who have expressed a modicum of concern."

Diane Winnecour would like the municipality to become more of an advocate for the disabled, possibly passing local laws that exceed what the federal and state governments require of private owners, or, at least, pressuring private establishments to make reasonable modifications when they remodel. "Maybe Sodini's would have put in an elevator if anyone had encouraged them," she reasons.

June Delano is hopeful that the commission, working with its Community Relations Board, will make every effort to listen to the disabled minority and to respond in a cost effective but humanistic way. "We've always been a good community for the person who has everything," she says, "but now it's time for us to become a good community for the person with special needs. If anyone in the town is denied access, we are all diminished because we live in a town that doesn't care — and some day it might be any one of us!"

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