

WHEELCHAIR CAPER

THE ASSIGNMENT BY PROFESSOR AL HASTORF

Recalled by Human Biology alumna Merry Lee Eilers '84

The course, back around 1980, was about the sociopsychological issues that confront disabled individuals. Our assignment was to find a partner in that class, pick up a wheelchair (provided by Professor Hastorf), and drive to a public place such as a mall. Then we two student partners would take turns pretending to be a “disabled” person. By being confined to a wheelchair for an hour or so, Hastorf hoped that his students would experience some of the problems that the disabled commonly face when in public.

Hum Bio student Phil and I proceeded with the wheelchair to a small two-level mall in Mountain View. We set up the wheelchair in the parking lot. I sat in the chair, with a small blanket covering my legs. Phil wheeled me into the ground level where we stopped first at the food court. We planned to have a light dinner there before exploring the mall.

Indeed, there were problems for me. The “quaint” cobblestones jarred my teeth. I could not see over the food counters to see what was in the hot trays, and (as we had been warned by Professor Hastorf), the clerk asked Phil what I would like to eat, as though my brain was as disabled as my legs. We ate our meal quickly, and then Phil pushed me along the hallways. We window-shopped, browsed in interesting shops, and checked out whether water fountains, telephones, elevator buttons, etc. were accessible to someone in a wheelchair.

It was now Phil’s turn to become “disabled.” We went into the elevator, and quickly switched places. We emerged on the second level, with Phil seated in the wheelchair, the blanket draped over his lap. As I pushed him along, we noticed a gentleman dressed in a gray suit and tie. It seemed that whenever we came out of a shop, that man was somewhere in the hall, pretending to look into windows, but always cast a sideways glance our way. We began to realize that he was a plain-clothes security mall officer.

Our two hours of experimentation were soon up, and we returned by elevator to the ground floor. Our observer was soon “window-shopping” near us as I pushed Phil to the entrance. When we reached my car, Phil hopped out of the chair and helped fold it up and put it into the back of the station wagon. The man in the gray suit stood at the Mall doors, watching our performance with the utmost suspicion.