

Wheelchair-bound student navigates campus

This story is reprinted from the Lawrence Institute of Technology magazine.

"Give me liberty or give me death," said Patrick Henry more than 200 years ago. Yet, for those like John Johnston of West Bloomfield, "wheelchair-bound" is a world designed for the "sound of limb," the theory of self-determination is too often only a dream.

But Johnston, an accounting student at Lawrence Institute of Technology and a victim of osteogenesis imperfecta, isn't complaining about the constant curtailment of his freedom of choice. He's just getting along the best he can.

"I'm used to planning everything well in advance," he said. "If I want to see a particular movie, for instance, I have to wait until it is at a theater that has the facilities to handle a wheelchair or I can't see it at all. There are only about three theaters in the Detroit area that I can go to because many of them haven't thought to make arrangements for the handicapped."

"When I call ahead, though, people often go out of their way to help. For instance, I wanted to go to a local night spot to see a comedian that I like a lot. When I phoned to ask about accommo-

dations for a wheelchair, they said 'no problem,' we'll give you a front table. That was really nice of them, but when I got there I found they had stairs and no ramp. Still one out of two isn't bad," he said.

"NEW ARENAS and buildings are required to have special facilities for the handicapped so now I can go to sports events at places like the Silverdome, which a few years ago would have been virtually closed to anyone in a wheelchair."

"People are paying more attention to the needs of the handicapped now," he said. "And that is really helping. It isn't that most others are intentionally uncompassionate. Many of them are well-meaning, and if they are reminded about the problems, they will usually do something about it."

One of the most recent problems for Johnston was the choice of a college to attend. He had to choose his college carefully, but not for the same reasons most others do. When asked why he chose LIT, he doesn't respond with the usual answers of "its reputation" or "its programs." Rather it's "I chose to come to LIT because the buildings are close together."

There also have been some areas

which are still a problem for Johnston now that he is at LIT, located in Southfield at Northwestern Highway and 10 Mile Road.

One of these is coming when he has to move quickly between classes. While other students choose their classes on the basis of interest, credits, professors or program requirements, Johnston is checking the column marked "location."

"ALTHOUGH I COULD probably get to another building in the 10 minutes allowed between classes, almost anything could delay me. So I like to schedule everything close together — on the first floor if possible."

"When I have to change buildings, I like to give myself an hour off so that I can be sure to make it in time. Snowy days are especially bad because the going is slow and the ramps can be really icy or sometimes so covered that it's hard to plow through."

Making light of the idea that it takes a lot of nerve to take a wheelchair down a snowy ramp, Johnston instead insists that his limited mobility really doesn't make him any different from any other student.

"The only time I was nervous was when I first started at LIT. But then,

isn't every student who first goes to college? I guess I wouldn't like to take my wheelchair down the side of a mountain, but as far as getting through the snow, it's just something I have to do."

An easy-going person who seems ready to tackle any problem if necessary, Johnston also sees the good side of his situation. He enjoys writing short stories and watching movies.

Out of necessity perhaps, he finds that his powers of observation are more finely tuned than those of others — a definite plus in the creative arts. He recalls one time, though, when his attentiveness was a plus for someone else.

"THERE WAS A guy in my classes who was always smoking a pipe, and when he was done with it he'd just put it in the pocket of his leather coat, assuming I guess that it had gone out."

"Well, one day after class the guy put the pipe in his pocket as usual and walked into the hall. I was sitting, waiting for the crowd to clear out when I saw all this smoke billowing out behind him. I called out, 'Hey, your coat's on fire,' and he managed to get it out before too much damage was done."

Johnston's powers of observation are not just good for others at the college. They also make him a better student, according to Greg Cheek, one of Johnston's management professors.

"John was one of only three students who received an A on my mid-term exam," Cheek said. "Being mobility handicapped doesn't slow him down at all nor does it make him any more self-conscious because he also got one of the highest grades for his class presentation."

Johnston's grades always have been high at both Farmington Harrison High School and at LIT. Many of his professors have especially noted his easy-going manner and ability to overcome any problem.

THERE ARE two things that never fail to make him angry. The first is anyone who parks in a handicapped parking space. The second is people who complain about the new requirements for designing barrier-free buildings.

In a show of displeasure quite unlike his usual character, but still with a trace of a smile, Johnston sums up his feelings about these complaints, using a word that could well describe the type of person it takes to accept situations where total freedom of choice is a luxury, not a guarantee.

"Tough," he said. But somehow the twinkle in his eye makes the vehemence less than real.



John Johnston conducts an active life as a college student despite his handicaps.

Trio of paralyzed vets plan 400-mile fund-raising trip

By Leonard Poger staff writer

Three men are planning an unusual summer trip to Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

They termed it "Two for the Soe and Lou."

They will start at the Michigan-Ohio border at US-24 and proceed to Sault Ste. Marie, about 400 miles away.

But what makes this trip different is that they won't be driving.

The three will make the trip by wheelchair for a specific purpose.

They want to increase the public's awareness of physically handicapped persons, particularly disabled veterans.

"We love the same country, and we dream the same dreams" as other persons, said Lee Doser of Dexter in citing "the theme of the International Year of the Handicapped, observed worldwide last year."

Doser stressed he wants the "charathon" trip to make people aware that handicapped persons in wheelchairs

can do anything the rest of the society can.

Doser, 32, will make the two-week trip in early July with Terry Sutton, 32, of Westland and Lou Cherwek of Troy.

Sutton said he wants the trip to make people in small towns along the route become aware of handicapped persons and their problems and the barriers in local buildings for wheelchair users.

Besides trying to increase public awareness of the handicapped, the three men want to raise funds for their organization, the Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America, based in Garden City.

The president of the Michigan chapter is George Jackson of Birmingham, who is also a vice president of the national organization, which provides a variety of sports, research, rehabilitation, education, service, legislative, and advocacy programs for members.

SUTTON, of 6515 Yale, is national claims officer for the PVA.

A paraplegic, he has been in a wheelchair from auto accident injuries suffered 11 years ago.

Doser, also a paraplegic, was wounded while serving as an Army paratrooper in Vietnam 11 years ago and has been in a wheelchair since.

The idea for the trip bisecting Michigan came from Doser, who talked about the project with Sutton and Jackson in an interview in the PVA office last week.

"I always wanted to make the trip," Doser said.

"The idea started about eight years ago when I did a crazy thing."

"I hitchhiked from Ann Arbor to Flint in three hours."

He admitted using a wheelchair always is challenging.

The group came up with the idea of putting on a fund-raising project using wheelchairs in November.

"We work together a lot here," he said.

"One person puts something in and triggers something else."

The first response to the suggestion was "Ave you crazy?"

But Doser bounced the idea off some

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BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Lee Doser (right) and Terry Sutton want to make the public more aware of the problems that handicapped people face.

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