

Friend to disabled overcame self doubt

By Mary Rodriguez
staff writer

George Casenhiser was ready to throw in the towel when he was a sophomore at Oakland University.

A quadriplegic confined to a wheelchair, Casenhiser was riddled with self doubt.

"A big problem was motivation," said Casenhiser. "I would ask myself, 'what was the point?' I think if I could have seen someone in the workforce who was disabled, it would have helped me realize I could make it, too."

"Luckily, I came to my senses." He credits support from family and friends, the freedom to live in a college dormitory and stubborn determination for keeping him on his eight-year path to academic success. Last April, he earned a bachelor of science degree in human resource development, with a minor in psychology.

Today, Casenhiser is a special-needs advocate at Oakland Community College. He was chosen last September for

the newly created, federally funded part-time job to help OCC's estimated 780 disabled students and their faculty cope.

"I HOPE to be a role model for some of them," said Casenhiser. "I'm hoping students will use me, my service. For the newer disabled, (the service) is really a good thing. They can see a person in a wheelchair making a living for himself. We all have handicaps to overcome — problems and obstacles we have to cope with."

At 28, Casenhiser has spent almost half his life confined to a motorized wheelchair, ever since he suffered a neck injury when he fell from a tree on a Boy Scout outing. He maneuvers his wheelchair with a chin control device.

For his 24-hour-a-week job, Casenhiser rotates daily between the five OCC campuses from his home in Union Lake.

"It's a little difficult commuting, but I've hooked up with a transportation service that is set up for dealing with handicapped people," he said.

'We all have handicaps to overcome — problems and obstacles we have to cope with.'

— George Casenhiser
special-needs advocate, Oakland Community College

HE'S AT the Highland Lakes campus Monday, Orchard Ridge on Tuesday, Southfield on Wednesday, Auburn Hills on Thursday and Royal Oak on Friday. Office hours are 12:30 to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 12:30 to 4:30 p.m. on Friday.

"I handle any type of handicap: wheelchair students, the deaf and blind and learning disabled. We are still in the process of letting people know we exist. This is a new service," he said. Casenhiser described how he might be of service to the disabled.

"Say they need some kind of testing done, they have difficulty writing and it's a time test," he said. "I would make special arrangements with the professor on behalf of the student. I also

make arrangements with the professor directly."

MANY OF the obstacles that once confronted the disabled have diminished over the past decade. Computerized rehabilitation devices — from sophisticated wheelchairs to computer-assisted typewriters activated solely by eye movement — have given many disabled persons greater mobility, independence and a higher degree of employability.

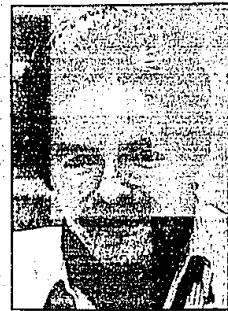
Casenhiser believes he has always

had a "God-given gift to listen and empathize with people." He has worked as a volunteer on the rehabilitation floor at St. Joseph Hospital in Pontiac, and as a counselor intern in the Columbian substance abuse program to complete degree requirements.

At OCC, he will be helping handicapped students individually as well as in groups. He plans to establish campus support groups "to share ideas, blow off steam and provide support in any way possible."

The federally funded state grant will be renewable on an annual basis. Casenhiser doesn't foresee his job turning into a 40-hour a week position.

"I think we'll be able to adequately take care of the needs of our students in the current time frame," he said.



George Casenhiser

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