

# Being the stranger in a strange land

## Wheelchair maneuverings involve personal strength

By Sherri Israel

Maybe the only way to understand how another person feels really is to walk a mile in his shoes.

Or roll a mile in his wheelchair.

Last week when I asked handicapped students adviser Jim Hayes if I could borrow a wheelchair ("sure," he responded, "you can use mine"), he warned that I wouldn't find riding around in one a pleasant experience.

A wheelchair looks harmless and easy to maneuver. Forget it. A rider must be able to pop a wheelie so he can conquer curbs if there's no curb cut. He must be able to roll his own weight up steep ramps. He must be able to open heavy doors. All of this done with arm muscles, and, believe me, it takes muscles.

Hulen Mall, one of the area's newest shopping centers, seemed a likely location for my research. I was of course interested in what the architect had taken into consideration when designing the mall.

He hadn't considered wheelchairs.

The east side of the mall is on the ground floor. The west side, where I entered, opens onto the second floor. The first problem I encountered was the door openers.

There weren't any.

It took five minutes to figure out how to pull open a door and roll through it at the same time. Since I could use one arm to open the door and the other to roll my chair through, the chair kept slamming sideways into the next door.

Once inside, I was feeling pretty cocky over conquering the door. The feeling vanished after my first few encounters with passers-by.

Some stared. Some wouldn't look. Some smiled apologetically. Some gaped. They all had one effect — they made me feel less than human.

I rolled into Sanger Harris with a forced smile. I searched out people's eyes and made them respond. One young mother with a small child in a stroller saw me coming down an intersecting aisle. She stopped, backed her child's stroller and went out of her way to avoid going by me. Other people scrunched close to the shelves when I attempted to pass.

Outwardly I smiled.

Pain and anger welled up inside me and I decided enough of this. Hayes had been right. No one would respond, except to show an agonized pity over my handicap.

Before I left, I stopped to look at some things for my nephew. The saleslady's name was Irene Clara Bennett and she changed everything for me.

"How old is your little boy?" she asked when she saw I was looking at some tiny blue jeans.

"He's 3, but he's not mine. He's my sister's boy. Do you think he'd like these suspenders?"

"Well, I have a boy 7 — as old as I am! — and he would never wear the suspenders I bought for him," she said with a smile. "Do you have any children?"

"Oh, no, I'm not married."

"How long have you been in the chair?" she asked.

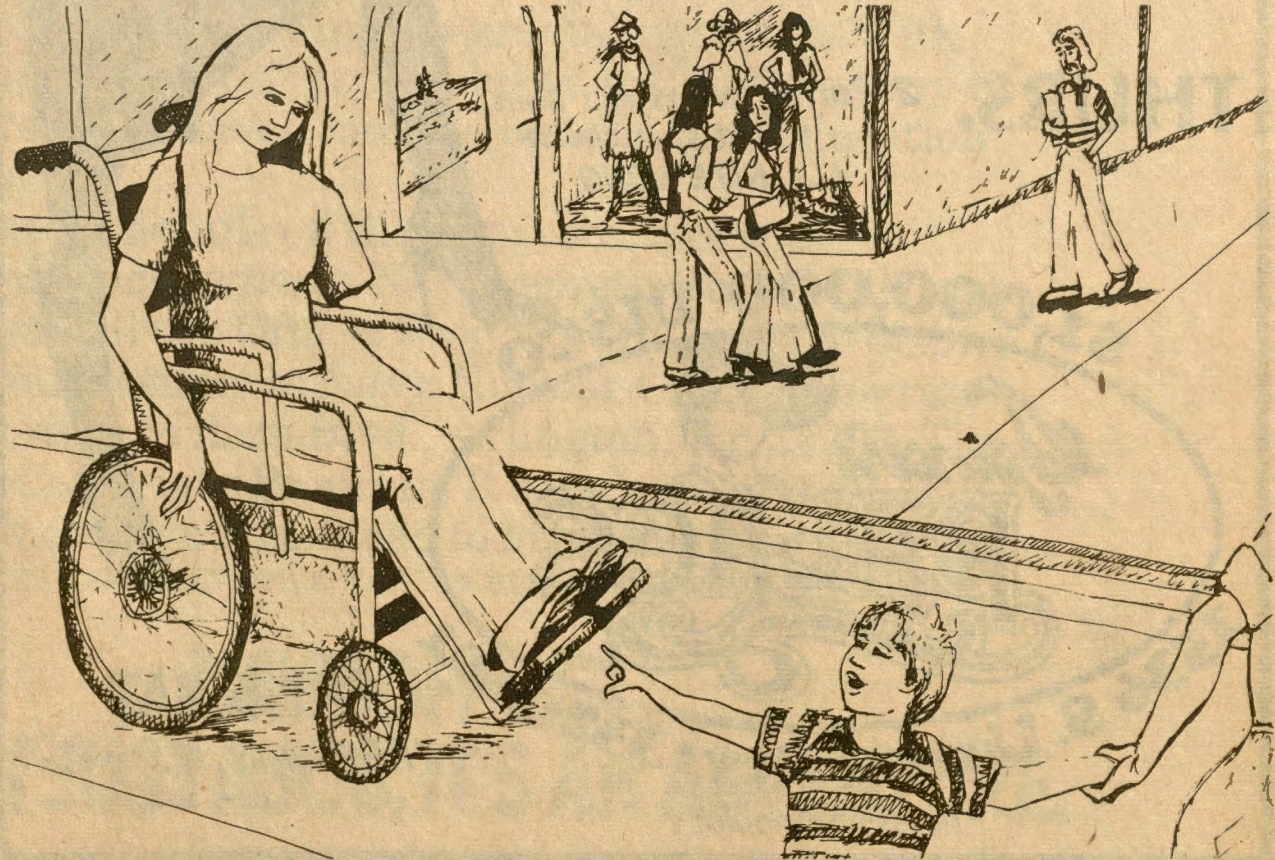
It was a simple enough question, except I hadn't thought of an answer. It was also a startling question. People

had seemed unwilling to acknowledge my "handicap," let alone talk about it.

"Two days," I replied. "I pulled a muscle in my leg and the doctor said I would have to stay off of my feet for a few days. So I decided 'if I'm going to miss work, I might as well get some shopping done.'"

"There you go!" Mrs. Bennett smiled. "Don't let it get at you."

(See Being, p. 2)



# Being . . . 'let me heal you'

(continued from p. 1)

"You know, I didn't think anything about being in a wheelchair for a few days, but I've been getting some pretty funny looks. It makes me feel sad and angry at the same time."

Even as we were talking, shoppers would make obvious efforts to detour and thus avoid facing me.

"Well, you've got the facts, so it shouldn't bother you," Mrs. Bennett reasoned. "All these people are wondering 'why is she in a wheelchair, she's so young?' But you know why; so you shouldn't let it bother you."

She paused to straighten some tiny socks on the shelf. "Does everyone smile?"

I stopped to consider how she meant this question. I took it she understood the reactions I must be getting.

"Oh, yes, very nicely — as if to say 'I don't mind that you are in a wheelchair,' but that usually follows a startled look that they can't quite mask," I said.

"Well, it is startling! We don't like to think we may be so powerless like you someday. But you'll come out on top. Any way you look at this, you'll

come out with the advantage. I think it'll probably teach you patience. With this experience, you might be willing to wait a little more on others. If you go through life taking everything this way, you will be a special lady."

After leaving Mrs. Bennett, I realized that she had made me feel whole again. I learned that not everyone is averse to seeing someone in a wheelchair. She treated me like a person with a mind and a personality, not just a handicapped person. So I made my way to the next shop. I wouldn't give up that easily.

After unsuccessfully trying to reach a high rack of blouses, I looked around for help. I noticed a woman following me and watching intently.

She was tall, and her hair was done up extremely high — a combination that made her seem to tower over me. Her beige dress resembled one my mother had when I was 6 or 7; it perfectly matched the strange lady's pointed beige shoes.

"Can I help you?" she whispered.

"I was trying to get a look at some of these blouses, but I really can't reach them." When my eyes lighted on her purse, I realized that the woman did not work in the shop, but was a customer herself.

"Can't you get up?" she asked in an almost indignant voice.

I had encountered no reaction when I entered the shopping center. Then I

had met Mrs. Bennett. Now this.

"No ma'am. . . Excuse me, please," I said over my shoulder as I rolled away. The woman continued to stare.

As much as I wanted to avoid a scene, I also wanted diverse reactions to my being in a wheelchair. I lolled at the door of the shop so the woman could catch up with me.

"Let me heal you!" she whispered harshly. "Come to church with me tonight. Once you listen to the sermon, you'll really believe and I can heal you."

What?

"I, uh, appreciate the offer but I have to work tonight, so I don't think I can make it," I said. I prayed she wouldn't ask my name or where I worked.

"But we can help you! Don't you want to get up out of that chair and walk?" she implored.

I fought off the devilish impulse of doing just that.

"Really I appreciate your kindness but I've tried everything, and I just don't think anything is going to help me walk again." I headed for the door, this time with great speed.

"I'll remember you in my prayers!" she called after me.

"Thank you," I said. "I don't think I'll forget you either."

Later that day I wheeled into the PE Building to return the chair. A weight-lifting class was meeting in the room where the chair was to go. I was very conscious of the stopped movement, the hushed voices, the serious looks.

The raised eyebrows of the men when I stood up and walked away from the chair made me realize that they had seen two different people — one who had rolled into the room, and another who had gotten out of the chair and walked out.

I had rolled a mile in his wheelchair, and though glad of the experience, I was more glad to walk away from that room.