



Jim Hayes, right, talks with Mark Partin, 22, a pre-law major.

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Shorthorn: Craig Fujii

Freewheeler coach

Accident 'best thing to ever happen'

By Sharon Egiebor

Staff Writer

Jim Hayes is a busy man. His work as educational support services coordinator and coach of the wheelchair basketball team keeps him that way.

But he found time last month to accept a certificate of appreciation from the Texas Rehabilitation Commission for his work with the handicapped.

Fifteen years ago his life was slower. It was the summer of '67 and Jim Hayes had just graduated from Paschal High School in Fort Worth. Around the corner were his 18th birthday, the Vietnam war and the draft.

"I was waiting for it," he recalled recently. "I was kind of raised that way. My father and my grandfather had both served in the Army. I presumed that this was the way it was. I had no career plans at the time."

That summer was the start of a new life for Hayes.

At a family celebration, he and his brother, John, two years younger, were

readying for a swimming race at Lake Benbrook. "I had swam this lake all my life," he said. "There was nothing unusual about that day."

As Hayes started to dive, his foot caught and he fell in head first. "There was nothing I could do," he said of hitting the bottom of the lake.

When his brother pulled him out, Hayes had no control of his legs. He had broken his neck and was paralyzed.

He was released from the hospital in fall '67.

He was bitter. "You're talking about football weather. I had been playing ball every year since I learned how to hold one. At the time I wasn't thinking that those days were over."

In December, a physical therapist told him he would never walk again and wouldn't be able to hold a job that required manual service.

"You feel you're in sort of a no man's land," Hayes said. "You know

things are out there but you just don't look."

He didn't indulge in self-pity for long. A nurse got him out of the house, and by June he was doing assembly work for a company that built data printers.

"After three weeks on the job I was getting more technical knowledge. The key was the supervisor's non-babying attitude. He was confident I could do the work."

This initial confidence gave Hayes the sense of challenge to continue striving. He decided to attend Tarrant County Junior College South after his company moved to New Jersey.

He achieved a 3.25 grade average the first semester. "It was quite an accomplishment for me," he said, since he'd never even considered college before.

A friend wanted Hayes to join a fraternity. At the pledge meeting, the president asked to speak to those with a 3:0 or higher GPA. Since he was the

only one, the president asked Hayes to run for student body president.

Hayes won and was re-elected the next term.

"I didn't know what my mental ability was," he said. "My attitude was 'I don't know, but let's try.'"

The most important thing he said he accomplished as student body president was establishing a viable senatorial body, allowing input from the students to the administration.

The late '60s were a period of struggle for the United States, he noted, especially on college campuses like TCJC which were "torn between the freaks — anti-Vietnam — and the returning vets."

Hayes changed his opinions about the war. "We have a responsibility in being U.S. citizens," he says. "There are times when there's a responsibility and we have to be there. I don't know whether Vietnam was one of those times."

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Hayes

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Hindsight is also 20/20, he said of the decade.

"My accident is probably the best thing that happened to me. As it turned out, I think I'm a wiser person because of it."

Hayes praises UTA's administration for reaching out to handicapped students through building changes and for deciding that education should not be for a select few.

"Many students used to choose their profession by the building they could get into," he said, adding that handicapped students here are majoring in every field imaginable.

"We look at the fields realistically. There are some things that some students can't do. It's up to the administration to direct them."

Hayes is enthusiastic about physical education. Both exercise and the exchange of

ideas, he believes, help students become independent.

"My goal is that all cervical 6 and 7 (referring to injured spinal cord vertebrae) students will be independent by the time they leave UTA," he said. "I don't expect every student to be a musclebound athlete, but I can expect them to reach their potential or close to it."

Hayes knows from experience that this is possible, once the student builds his confidence.

"Every day is a new challenge, a new beginning — thus I'm going to be progressing," he said. "I'm going to do it if I set my mind to it. It may not be the way you do it and you may not approve, but what's wrong with being in a wheelchair? I still get from point A to point B.

"That's what we teach our students. We give them things that they think they can't do."