

For years, educators from around the country have been coming to Mizzou to see its model program for students with disabilities.

Mizzou was committed to an open, accessible campus long before a 1973 federal mandate required all public institutions to be accessible to everyone. In the late '50s, a committee of educators and administrators started making plans to bring down the physical barriers at MU.

And as new technologies have developed over the years, Mizzou has stayed in the forefront, helping disabled students get the education they need to make the most of their lives.

Dr. John McGowan, professor of educational and counseling psychology, was a member of that first committee. He remembers the giant task that planners faced in removing the physical obstacles that kept people with disabilities out of the college classroom.

As a first step, the group visited other campuses to see what was being done. McGowan recalls one Midwestern university where students with disabilities were segregated from the rest of campus life.

"We didn't like the idea of separate dorms and classrooms," McGowan says. "We went in exactly the opposite direction here. Our philosophy was to integrate students with disabilities into the ongoing campus."

Because of its pioneering work, the federal government selected Mizzou as a regional center for disabled students from six Midwestern states.

MU's program is still one step

ahead of the rest. At every level of campus life—from the admissions office to the residence halls, from the grounds crews to individual professors—the needs of disabled students are considered.

Over the years Mizzou has remodeled buildings all over campus—from classrooms to laboratories to dormitory rooms—so that disabled students can get in and out more easily. Every new building is designed to minimize any barriers that students with disabilities might face.

Special offices, such as the Access Office for Students With Disabilities and the Learning Center, coordinate the many opportunities for disabled students at MU. What makes the Mizzou program different from others is its focus on "integrated accessibility."

At some institutions that's just technical jargon. Carma Messerli, M Ed '85, BS Ed '83, coordinator of the access office, explains what the term means at MU.

"That means every program will be accessible to every student. It means every student with a disability is utilizing the same services, the same programs and the same buildings as other students," Messerli says.

At MU the program means more than automatic doors, so disabled students don't have to wait for a passerby to help them get into a classroom building. It means more than telephones and water fountains at just the right height for students who use wheelchairs and restroom

stalls wide enough in which to maneuver a wheelchair.

From the time a disabled student first applies to MU, the access office tries to see that there's a smooth transition to Campus life.

"We're involved very early on. Our goal is to have a holistic approach, to look at every aspect of a student's life. We feel it's our responsibility to make them aware of all the resources available here," Messerli explains. "A disability is an inconvenience. It doesn't have to mean you can't do something."

Each semester, Messerli says, 200 to 300 students, most of them severely handicapped, sign up with her office for programs that offer them the special help they need to be successful at Mizzou.

The array of resources for disabled students is impressive. For starters, the access office operates a screening service to help disabled students hire personal attendants and readers. If a disability makes it impossible for a student to complete a test in the allotted time, the office works with professors to provide adaptive testing techniques.

For example, a blind student needs help reading the test questions. Paralyzed students might have to dictate their test answers to someone else or might simply need more time to work through the exam.

The access office works individually with students, planning class schedules that make sure they get the courses they need and still have plenty of time to make their next class. To help disabled students get to class on time, the office even coordinates a transportation service.

And the office helps disabled students look beyond their time at Mizzou. It helps them compete in the job marketplace after they graduate. By advising on volunteer jobs and work-study opportunities, the office sees to it that disabled students can have the polished resumes they need to prove themselves to potential employers.

"MU was really a pioneer in terms of becoming accessible. Some of the things we do are so minute, but they have a tremendous impact on disabled students," Messerli says. ☐

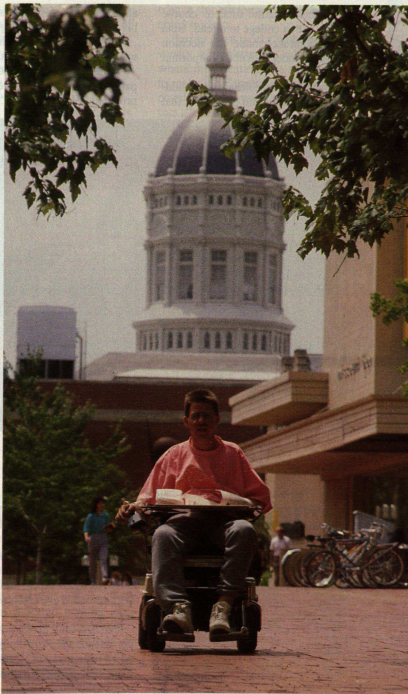
Equal Access

By JOHN BEAHLER

Around Campus
and in the classroom,
the barriers
have come down
for disabled students

Max Lewis crosses Lowry Mall on his way home from a day of classes.

Bob Hill photo



Max Lewis

Making it to the finish line

A few years ago Max Lewis was a familiar sight around Sedalia, Mo. Most days you could see the cross-country star at Smith-Cotton High School jogging down the streets of his hometown, training for the grueling track event. He ran for the pure joy it gave him.

Now Lewis is meeting another chal-

lenge. A diving accident in 1986 left him paralyzed.

But the MU junior navigates his wheelchair around Campus with the same energy that once helped him leave his cross-country competitors in the dust. He goes all out to keep up with the classwork and to study for a degree in secondary education.

While his electric wheelchair hums down the sidewalks on Campus, Lewis is alert for any bumps or potholes. "There's no shocks on these things," he says with a laugh. "When you hit one of those bumps—boom—major earthquakes."

No one can clear all the obstacles out of his path, but MU's program for disabled students is helping to put his goal within reach.

For years Lewis's ambition has been to coach a high-school track team. He knew it wouldn't be easy, but two years ago he enrolled in the College of Education's program for physical education teachers.

Along the way, Lewis has been faced with some difficult adjustments. For example, the requirements for a physical education degree include classes in swimming, weight training and dance.

"It's obvious I can't do those things," he says. Instead, he's working with his advisers to figure out a modified program.

"The faculty's been really helpful. They're always open minded, and they're there for the student, regardless of whether the student is disabled or not.

"Just going from class to class can be a challenge," he explains. "If you're disabled you don't just go out the front door. You go out certain doors; you go in certain doors. You go up certain elevators.

"In the past two years I've seen some drastic improvements as far as getting around—wider wheelchair ramps and more curb cuts," he says. "I think the University is doing a good job as far as access is concerned."

For Lewis, one of the most important benefits of the accessibility program is more subtle than a wheelchair ramp or an automatic door.

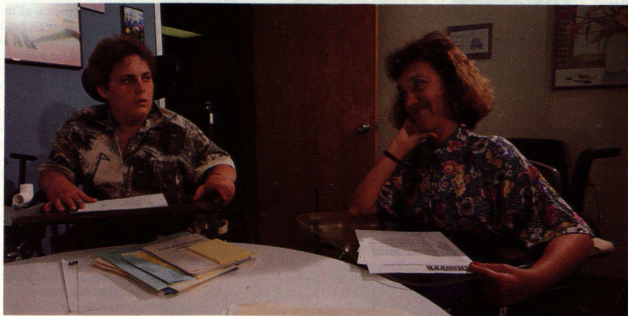
His accident left him with limited use of his hands. That makes it almost impossible to take notes in class or to write down the answers to an essay test.

The Access Office for Students With Disabilities provides people to help Lewis take notes and write out the answers to test questions. "That program is really important," he explains. "If it wasn't for that I probably wouldn't be in school right now." ☐

Gina Ventucci Striving for self-reliance

Gina Ventucci, left, and access office Coordinator Carma Messeri plan events for disabled MU students.

Rob Hill photo



When it came time to choose which college to attend, Gina Ventucci made her decision carefully. Independence is important to her.

She's used a wheelchair since childhood and knew from experience that

an accessible campus would make a big difference in her college career.

"For someone who is disabled the whole focus is freedom," she says.

"I decided to come to Mizzou partly because of the better access it provided," Ventucci says. "I looked at

Hazel Fields Computerizing oral arguments

A voice synthesizer reads back notes Hazel Fields took in class.

Rob Hill photo



Hazel Fields' apartment in Columbia is dotted with stacks of cassette tapes that are filled with recorded class lectures and legal texts.

Perched on a desk at the center of her study is a lap-top computer hooked up to an array of electronic equipment that includes a state-of-the-art voice synthesizer.

For Fields, who is blind, the computer makes all the difference in her success in law school. To demonstrate how special the machine is, she taps a code into the keyboard and a disembodied, mechanical voice begins reciting the notes she had taken earlier in class.

"I used to tape my lectures," she explains, "But later I had to spend all that time going back through the tape and taking notes from it. I knew that in law school I wasn't going to be able to do it with my old methods."

some private colleges, but they were not accessible and had no intention of becoming accessible. Since I spent high school in the same type of environment, I really felt it was time to give myself a break."

At MU, the junior from St. Louis County found what she was looking for: the intellectual challenge she wanted, along with special programs that help her do things for herself.

"Being in a wheelchair is enough of a segregation. I just want to mix and mingle with my friends. You just kind of want to be with everyone else," she says.

And Mizzou offered Ventucci a certain kind of balance that generations of other students have found at MU. "It's close enough to home to keep my mom and dad happy and far enough away to make me feel independent," she says.


Ventucci is majoring in psychology and social work. In addition to a full load of classes, Ventucci is president of Barrier Free, a student group that

tries to smooth the way for other disabled students.

Barrier Free works with the University administration, advising on where modifications are still needed to make the Campus as accessible as possible. Every year the group sponsors a "Access Awakening Week" to help the Mizzou community understand what a physical disability can mean.

"To have a disability and still make some changes you have to be vocal," Ventucci says of her work with Barrier Free. "I think it's difficult for an able-bodied person to know what it's like to be disabled 24 hours a day, all the small struggles of a disabled person."

For people with disabilities, she says, it's even more important that a university education is available. "A college degree is imperative. You're always going to have to prove yourself to your able-bodied cohorts."

"I decided I was really going to have to exercise my mind, not my body. Because my mind would get me a job. My body wouldn't." 

The portable computer is small enough that Fields can tote it along to class. When she comes home, she simply plugs it into her voice synthesizer and the machine reads back her notes.

The synthesizer takes some getting used to. The speech patterns that come out of it sound nothing like everyday English. First-time users would swear they were hearing a foreign language.

Fields has had her computer less than a year, but she cranks the controls of the voice synthesizer up so fast that the blur of syllables would sound like gibberish to anyone else.

The computer gives her the electronic link she needs to research the vast body of legal literature, even though most of it has never been transcribed into braille. Fields uses her computer to tap into LEXIS—a legal data base that lets her call up law cases and judges' decisions.

Her transition to the world of computers took a lot of practice and hard work, and it still does. "There are


always little problems that have to be ironed out," Fields says.

When she runs into those problems, she turns to the staff at Mizzou's Center for Adaptive Computing—a program that ensures that disabled students have access to the latest in computer technology.

The programming experts at the center work one-on-one with disabled students, adapting software programs for their individual needs.

Fields has had a lot of other support at Mizzou. MU's Access Office helps her screen the people she hires to read and record textbooks.

For as long as she can remember she has wanted to be a lawyer. Now she's sure that with just a little extra help, and a little extra work, she'll make it through the rigors of her law school education.

"You have to be persistent," she says. "You have to be very persistent. But I'm confident. My family always told me I was stubborn." 



Harold Wilke is the director of Healing Community, an organization in White Plains, N.Y., that helps religious organizations create barrier-free buildings and attitudes.

The game's afoot

Fellow MU students sometimes turned in surprise as I walked with a book or two balanced on my shoulder, heading for class. Long, quick strides brought me from Chemistry 101 on the White Campus to Professor Fred McKinney's Psychology 101 on the fourth floor of Jesse Hall. There, in class, other students would look in some surprise, but only at first, as I slipped my left foot out of the shoe, pulled a pen from my pocket with my toes, and started taking notes.

Although I was born with no arms, I was not an "armless wonder," merely another student acting and looking basically normal. I did not shake hands in greeting, but my smile was ready and wide. I loved life and participated in University activities, including sports both active and as a spectator. Independent in daily living activities, I used my imagination to find alternative ways to fulfill tasks.

Some years later, having finished graduate school at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and armed with a degree in divinity, I returned to Columbia dressed much more soberly to serve the United Church of Christ.

Out of my experiences I have written four books, a number of monographs, plus a great many articles in journals and magazines, which I typed with my toes. Those toes have served me well, but of course imagination, zeal, perseverance and grace are the real help.

Over the years, I found that I could do almost anything I wanted, except play the piano; I just had to find different ways of doing things.

On a recent cross-country flight, I noticed the stewardess giving me frequent glances as she distributed the meals. Finally she spoke up. "You're wearing your watch on your ankle!"

I had been reading a book—holding it with my foot as usual—and the watch was clearly visible. "It's the latest style in New York," I said hiding a smile.

How do you make an ankle watch out of a wristwatch? Simple. Just add three or four links to the band. Expansion is the whole idea—to stretch our horizons, and to reach out to the beyond. We can always find another way.

—Harold Wilke, AB '37