

Editor of disabled newsletter strives to help community

By Betsy Clayton
Emerald Reporter

If the old saying "The squeaky wheel gets the grease" holds true, then Maggie Saint Onge says she is a squeaky wheel.

Saint Onge is the editor and publisher of "accessABILITY," a monthly newsletter for disabled people in the community. She came up with the idea of the newsletter, gathers information for it, puts it together with the help of a friend and then distributes it.

All her time is volunteered, and she does it because it's important, she said. "There's a need for the disabled to have something that's just theirs," Saint Onge said. Disabled people can feel so isolated and they need to hear that something is being done, she said. "Nothing gets done unless you speak up."

That's why Saint Onge calls herself a squeaky wheel. She is helping to get something done, and she knows how much it's needed because she is disabled.

Saint Onge has been producing the newsletter since July 1986. She worked on a local Multiple Sclerosis newsletter for a year and then decided to put out her own newsletter.

At first she dug up the information herself by looking in the newspapers, contacting local groups and keeping up with the city's Disabilities Advisory Coalition. Now she gets help from a few people who submit stories about the community and sports events.

She said this is exactly what she wants to happen. Anything with a slant for the disabled is great for the newsletter, and the more contributors the better.

Saint Onge also contributes to "Action News," a newsletter aimed at people in business and government who deal with the disabled population. She said as far as she knows there are no other publications like this in the state. Since she began printing, other state agencies have expressed interest in both her newsletter and the possibility of publishing a similar one themselves.

But things have not always been this successful for Saint Onge. When she started her paper, all the funding was out of her pocket, and it was sometimes hard to work on it not knowing where future funding was coming from.

"There's been times when I think I'm not being appreciated and that there's not anyone out there who's reading it," she said. Six months ago, things looked up when Sacred Heart General Hospital gave her \$300 to help with the publishing costs.

After Saint Onge and her graphic editor, Judy Woodward, put together an issue, they deliver it to strategic loca-

tions around Eugene. Some copies are sent in the mail to subscribers for \$7 per year.

"What I would like to do eventually is to cover the costs and maybe make a little money," she said.

Saint Onge, 43, has had M.S. for 26 years. She said she has learned to take things in stride and she knows she doesn't want to miss out on life.

She said she went through the "why me?" question and a lot of denial for a long time.

"Then I realized that's all there is. If you don't make the best of it you're not hurting anybody but yourself," she said.

A lot of disabled people feel like they can't do anything, Saint Onge added. She attended Lane Community College from 1979 to 1983, and she got caught in a defeatist frame of mind, she said. "I felt my education was wasted. What

would I do with a degree? It's easy to get caught in that trap," she said.

Now Saint Onge thinks that disabled people don't have "a corner on the market." She said able-bodied people go through the same things, it's just a little bit more for disabled people. Both can experience a defeatist attitude, she said.

Saint Onge was able to overcome all this when she found herself in a bad marriage and realized that life was passing by. "I wasn't getting a piece of the action. So when I split with my husband and got a divorce, I started 'accessABILITY,'" she said.

It's hard to get a disabled person involved, Saint Onge said, and she doesn't know exactly why.

"Some disabled people have a real chip on their shoulders. Some have short fuses. A lot don't have the energy level to

get more involved," she said.

Energy and attitude are not the only things preventing the disabled from getting involved in activities. The climate affects people in wheel chairs quite a bit.

"Disabled people in wheel chairs don't just get wet on the top of their heads. They get wet. Their laps and what they take get wet, and they can't hurry," she said.

Society has misconceptions

about disabled people, and Saint Onge thinks able-bodied people often judge the disabled by the disability and not by the individuals that they are.

"In a one-on-one situation, chances are the first thing a disabled person thinks is 'They're looking at my disability, not me,'" she explained.

When able-bodied people tend to lump handicapped people

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Photo by Andy Cripe

Maggie Saint Onge, editor and publisher of "accessABILITY," prepares to design her monthly newsletter for the disabled community.

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