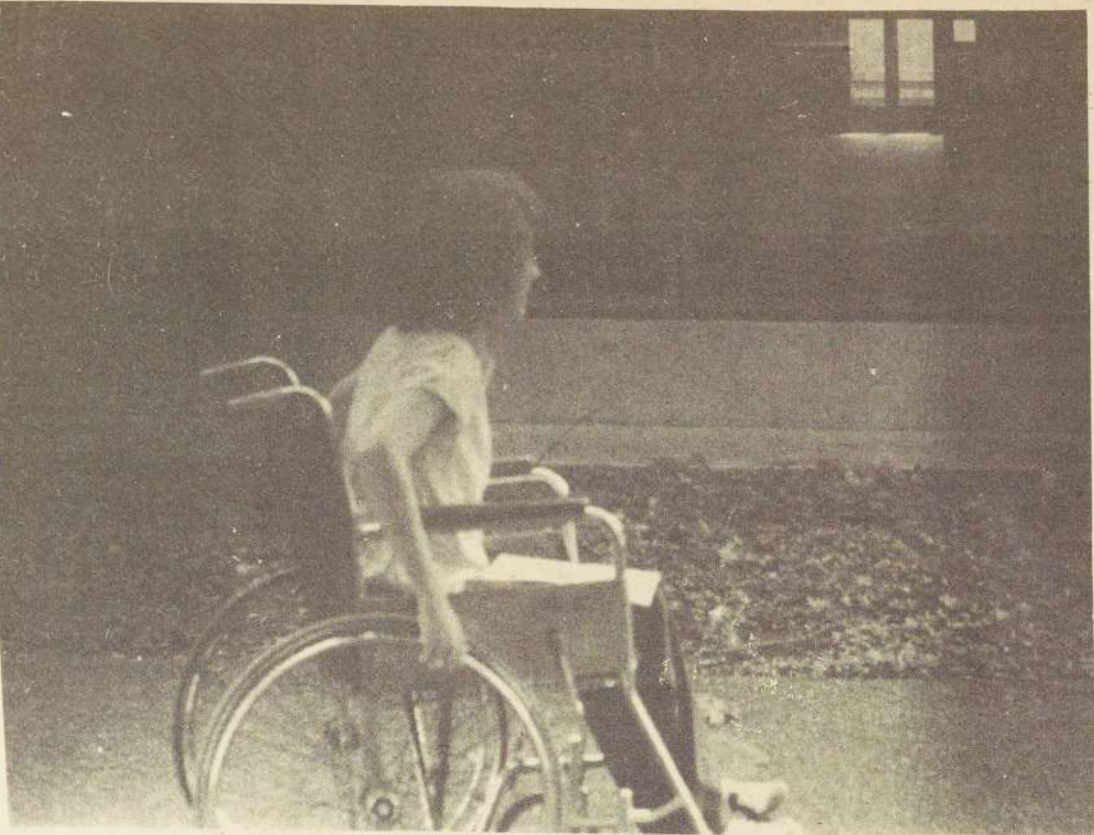


# Handicap for a day proves interesting and frustrating



By Leanne Lally  
Of The Print  
First of two parts

The prison is small and mobile, the four wheels it sits on are wide. Metal and rubber form a chair that once in, changes a person's view about life. The prison is a wheelchair.

For the handicapped, this prison is a place they confront daily. For someone not handicapped, sitting in the wheelchair for a day can bring new and startling insights on what it's like to be handicapped.

What's it like to be handicapped? I tried it for a day and found out it's scary.

The real test came after I sat down in the chair and was promptly wheeled through the Community Center. Millions of eyes stared at me as if I were an attraction in a freak show. Many of the people had seen me walking upright on campus before this and were probably thinking things like, "Poor girl, I wonder what happened," and "What a pity, she's so young."

I felt a sense of embarrassment having all those people stare. I wanted to get up out of the chair and say, "see, there's nothing wrong with me. I'm just pretending." But a real handicapped person can't just stand up and say that.

Getting around was quite a problem. If you don't have a good set of biceps, sitting in a wheelchair will build them up in no time. Not only that, you're three feet shorter than

everybody and a few feet wider, too. Scraped knuckles were a common mishap in my day as a handicapped person.

I'm sure that everybody going to school here has seen the ramps that are connected to the trailers. We as upright people walk into many of our classes on them because it's quicker than the stairs. If you're in a wheelchair, the event is like climbing Mt. Everest. The ramps on most of the trailers were so steep that I just rolled back down or didn't get up at all. And going down was worse.

The big blue doors on the trailers that seemed so easy to open when leaving a classroom are quite a bit harder to open when you have to maneuver a wheelchair through them while holding the door open.

After I finally got the door well enough open to wheel through, I began to shake; I just knew I wasn't going to make it down the ramp without killing myself or denting the chair. I began my decline. Holding tightly onto the wheels so I wouldn't roll down the ramp I gently pushed myself over the bump and promptly "slid" into the stairs opposite the ramp. My heart was racing as I crashed into the concrete stairs. Checking my injuries (there were none except for a wounded spirit), I shakely got back in the chair. I was just about ready to give it up.

My whole day went like that. Once I accidentally rolled through a mudpuddle only to

have the muck end up on my hands after turning the wheels. The automatic opening doors are scary, too, especially if someone is pushing you. It seemed as though they would swing open and take my face off.

Eating lunch was another hassle. I was too big to fit through the gate of the cafeteria line so I had to wheel my way through the crowd and enter where everyone else exits. In the lunch crowd I felt like a hippo among swans. Everything was low enough for me but the place they keep the cottage cheese, eggs, and yogurt, was too far away for me to grab. I bought a glass of Coke. Carrying the Coke was hard because I had to have my only two hands free to wheel the chair out of the vicinity.

By that time my arms were killing me. It's strenuous to pull your weight with your arms. It's like doing chin-ups. I was never good at those.

I was lucky, I didn't have to stay in the chair very long. I didn't have to go home on the bus in it, I didn't have to wheel around at home. I didn't have to go to a movie or a restaurant in the chair. At the end of the day I could get out of the chair and walk upright again, like before. When I did I felt a sense of relief, but more than that, when I saw a person in a wheelchair, and they weren't pretending, I could really identify with them; I knew exactly what it was like. Well, almost.



Photos by Kevin Almond

