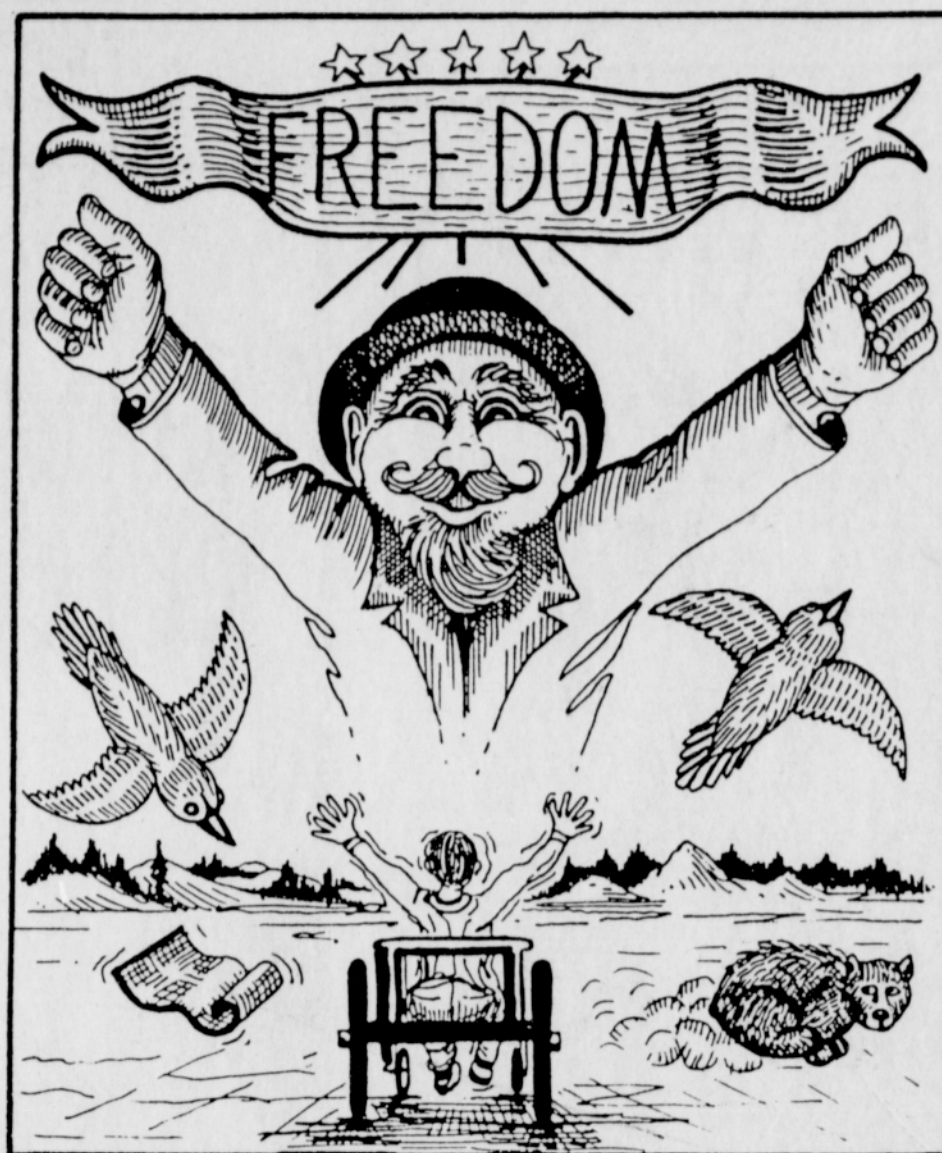


# SAM'S SOCIAL SUICIDE

Drawings by Michael DeWaide



by Arthur Honeyman

Portland writer Arthur Honeyman has cerebral palsy. He has spent his life fighting the prejudices that society has against people who are handicapped. He wrote a book "Sam And His Cart" about a young boy with cerebral palsy and has just completed a sequel (both illustrated by Michael DeWaide of Astoria), "Sam And His Bright Idea", which takes place a few years later when Sam is fifteen. Some people want Sam removed to an institution and they petition the town council. Sam is defended by a newspaper reporter named Mac, who is killed a month later saving a little girl from a train, and by an old woman named Melinda.

Virtually the whole town was present. Every seat was occupied and throngs were standing in the aisle and along the back wall. Sam was in a daze; he knew most of the people there, but he recognized only a few of them. The five members of the Town Council appeared in single file and took their places at the front of the auditorium. The meeting came to order.

The Chairperson, Mrs. Schwartz, managed to skillfully request and push through a motion with minimum effort, to table reading the minutes discussion of old business until the next week. Then, she said, "Thank you all for coming. We are creating town history today. Not since the 'great stock market' crash have we come close to having this large attendance at our Town Council meetings. No matter what the outcome of today's meeting is, I think we all owe Sam a round of applause for having brought us all together." The room filled with spirited applause weakly interspersed with dissenting cries of "boo!" Mrs. Schwartz waited for the noise to subside and, then, she brought the meeting back to order by saying, "Mr. Champlin, I understand that you intend to formally register a complaint about Sam. Do I understand correctly?"

"Yes," boomed Mr. Champlin rising uncharacteristically straightbacked and striding briskly forward, "and I've brought with me a petition, signed by numerous townspeople, to pass a town ordinance which would not allow handicapped people to carry out daily activities in public. I claim that Sam and others like him are a public nuisance and danger to the non-handicapped citizenry and themselves." He turned and faced the townspeople saying "Judging from your applause, I would say that we all share an admiration for the courage it's taking for Sam to be present at this meeting. However, this does not alter the fact that, because of Sam, I almost had a bad automobile accident, just last week. Nor does it remove the feeling of pity and disgust experienced by many of us when we see the young man crawl from the filthy sidewalk into a clean and respectable establishment where food and beverages are sold. I've been told by some of you that it sickens you, but you don't have the heart to say anything. And, all this is not dis-

cussing the details of the already mentioned near accident, in which I almost killed him. Reality is harsh. If Sam and his father don't have the common sense to protect him endangering his precious life, shouldn't we protect the lives of our citizenry...?"

Mrs. Schwartz said, "Thank you Mr. Champlin." She turned toward Sam, saying, "Sam... you may choose a proxy to speak and act in your behalf. Would you like your father or a friend to be your proxy?"

Sam had prepared himself for this moment; he had decided that it was not much different from selling door to door. He, himself, was the product. That was the primary difference. He was beginning to realize that, because he had Cerebral Palsy, he would have to spend much more time proving his value or worth to other people than do most people, just to operate on a "normal" daily basis in his community. Whether "unfair" or not, this was his reality. So, as calmly as possible, Sam spoke, keeping his involuntary jerking and stuttering at a minimum. "I'll've reque-quesstted Mac to read a statement ththat I typed llast night, b-bbut he's nnot mmy p-proxy!" Then, with a sort of a lunge, he jerked his head in Mac's direction. Mac rose to his feet saying, "I had nothing to do with writing this statement. I reserve expressing my thoughts for later." Then, from the wrinkled mess which he took from his pocket, he read in his booming oratory:

"When I came home from Special School, all I wanted to do was to make money during Christmas vacation, the way I've been doing since about three years ago when I first started selling lightbulbs. Some kids make money by delivering newspapers. I decided to sell lightbulbs because I'm too uncoordinated in my muscles for delivering newspapers. I thought I was doing a good thing, not a bad thing. I still think this is true. I still think it is a smart thing to do. I also think I've got rights! Thank you very much. — Sam"

Stark silence followed Mac's powerful reading of Sam's statement, but, this time, surprised tears flowed throughout the room.

Finally, Mrs. Schwartz startled everyone by speaking, "Mac, you want to express your thoughts?"

Mac stood there, nodded his head and his voice rang out. "Okay, I'll go for it now. It's sad to say, but Sam's courage almost deserted him this afternoon. His logical mind urged him to use common sense, to pay attention to the fear gripping his stomach, fear that the people (especially those who support neighbor Champlin's erroneous position that handicapped people constitute a nuisance and danger both to the general public and to themselves; that as such, they must be compassionately institutionalized 'out of sight — out of mind'), yes, fear that the people in his neighborhood, in his home town might decide to take action which would prevent him from leading as 'normal' a life as possible. But Sam's common sense went deeper than that; it told him that, if he couldn't stand the pressure of being afraid, then, perhaps, he ought to be compassionately institutionalized away from social

prejudices. In other words, Friends and Neighbors, fear and common sense almost drove Sam to social suicide. Happily, because of a few years of experience in the pains and joys of life, I was able to expand Sam's view of what is 'common sense' by explaining that his institutionalization might last (Who knows, sixty — seventy-five years?) all his life, not just a couple of days, weeks, months or years, but until his death. Thus, I believe that Sam's decision to come down here to fight for the 'rights' he thinks he has is based on logic, not bravery. Sam is using the logic that we all use when we want something. That tells us that we should let other people know where we stand. The point I'm trying to make is that the eloquent Mr. Champlin compliments Sam for his courage and, then, he urges us to base our decision on logic and reality, not pity or recognition of courage. I urge us to do the same...."

Mac spun around on his heel in the direction of Mrs. Schwartz saying, "I'm very sorry. I got carried away." Earth shaking applause broke out as Mac scuttled out the rear exit disappearing from Sam's sight for the last time.

The applause ceased and Melinda, magnificently dressed in her finest black, struggled to her feet and cane and, without requesting permission, hobbled to the front of the auditorium, slowly turned to face the townspeople with just a trace of a smile on her lips and a faint twinkle in her eyes. In a soft clear voice Melinda said, "My statement won't be so eloquent or lengthy as the one we just heard." Mild laughter relieved the tension in the auditorium for Melinda was famous for her lengthy though eloquent statements. She continued, "Both Mac and Mr. Champlin are right. Let us use logic to determine the outcome of this meeting. But, let us also use our emotions to guide us in making our decision. For me (and I think, for you too), knowing Sam is an emotional experience. Sam makes people feel. Like a son, he sometimes makes me angry or feel protective, but mostly he brings joy into my life. Although I don't understand why, I guess that Sam makes some people feel pity, disgust and fear when they see him. Let us not deny these feelings. Let us acknowledge them. And the next time Sam almost causes an accident, let the people involved scream at him, the way we always do with any 'dumb kid' who might make it to adulthood, including your kid, Mr. Champlin!" Melinda, uncharacteristically, slipped in an unrefined wink which made everyone laugh, even Mr. Champlin. She finished her statement by saying with a smile, "But, let's keep Sam out in the public eye, where he can be watched!" She hobbled over and placed her hand on Sam's shoulder.

After the applause and laughter subsided, Sam's father rushed forward saying in a quick crisp manner like he always spoke when he was excited or nervous, "There's not much left to say. Most of it's already been said. I'm proud of Sam. He works the way I've always taught him to. You never know if your kid's going to make it after you die, especially if the kid's crippled. After today, I'm sure Sam's going to survive, and survive well, whatever happens...."