

Let's Stop "Handicapping" Americans



Dwight Guilfoil, Jr.

I AM ONE OF 17 million Americans lumped together under the unfortunate heading of "physically handicapped." Why unfortunate? Because most of us don't see ourselves as handicapped. Sure, I've been confined to a wheel chair

since a combined attack of spinal meningitis and polio while I was in the Air Force during World War II. But handicapped? I don't think so. Being handicapped is a state of mind.

I learned that lesson in the first few months after I was told I could never walk again. More than anyone else, my wife Marge taught it to me. We had a saying then that I recommend to everyone—whether or not he has a physical problem. I had to learn that "life by the yard is hard, but it's a cinch by the inch."

Marge helped me to see that if I could take it a day at a time—work at solving the little problems of that day instead of brooding about the big problem of life—I could overcome this affliction and become a useful husband and father again.

When I understood clearly that we can adjust to almost any physical disability if we don't let our thinking processes become disabled, too—then I no longer considered myself handicapped.

There are millions of other physically disabled Americans who have learned this same lesson. We have much to contribute—if only we're permitted the opportunity. About 100 so-called handicapped men and women who work with me at the Paraplegic Manufacturing Co. in Franklin Park, Ill., are proving this.

I only wish that all the people who doubt the ability of the physically disabled to contribute in full and enthusiastic measure to a competitive, profit-making business could visit our plant and see our people at work.

This company is no charity operation. It is a successful business in the highly competitive field of electronic subcontracting. Every time you dial a telephone long-distance, you're likely to be using precision equipment made by our people. And whenever an American missile is blasted aloft, it frequently contains an electronic testimonial to the skill of handicapped workers in our plant.

While our business was growing, I learned that other Americans have practically no understand-

We penalize the disabled even more than their physical mishaps do, says this successful wheel-chair businessman



By DWIGHT GUILFOIL, JR.

"HANDICAPPED AMERICAN OF THE YEAR"

as told to Joseph N. Bell

ing of the problems of the physically handicapped. The number of physically disabled Americans is increasing by about 250,000 each year—much faster than job opportunities are opening up for them. Unless we tackle this problem intelligently, many of these people will not only lose their self-respect but will finally have to fall-back on public dole.

On what points is understanding most urgently needed? To begin with, stop thinking of physically impaired people as "handicapped." This label was adopted to soften the word "cripple," but the connotations of "handicapped" are even more pain-

ful to us. The name implies across-the-board inability to perform work functions, and this isn't true.

Let the handicapped compete. Many people, in a sincere effort to help disabled people, actually make things more difficult for them. For example, when our company first went to a bank for a loan, bank officials were sympathetic but turned us down on the grounds that if the loan were made and we ever defaulted on payment, the bank couldn't possibly foreclose because of adverse public opinion.

Don't dismiss the idea of employing handicapped workers without finding out what they can do—on a fair and equitable basis. We have a sign in our plant that says: "It's ability, not disability, that counts." Discrimination against hiring workers with a physical disability is based on a single prevalent misunderstanding: that it doesn't make for a more profitable business. This has been proved false. Statistics are available to show that so-called handicapped workers have better attendance records and superior dedication to their jobs.

RECOGNIZE the physically handicapped as individuals—and deal with them that way. I've had social workers call me and say: "I have an amputee. Can you give him a job?" When I ask his background and what sort of work interests him, I frequently draw a blank. Almost everyone concerned with the handicapped thinks of them in vague job terms—and vague individual terms, as well. These people have individual skills, interests, and abilities, just like anyone else.

Don't be patronizing to people with physical disabilities. The handicapped do not want to be coddled or fussed over. More than anything else, we want to be self-reliant.

We had a young lady working in our plant who had never been able to walk. When she came to us (in her late 20s), she had been pampered at home to the point where she had grown to expect similar treatment from everyone. She didn't find it here. She found understanding, helpfulness, and courage—but not sympathy. She had been convinced that there were only a few things that she could do; after a short time with us, she learned there were only a few things she couldn't do.

I see this sort of thing happen almost daily; yet I know there must be much greater understanding among many more people to meet the growing national challenge of physical disability. To those who would look on me and my fellow workers as "handicapped," I say only: "Give us half a chance, and we'll show you how wrong you are."

COVER:

Photographer Carl Purcell captures the impressive figure of Navy's football hero, Joe Bellino. Though not big by football standards, Joe is one of the most feared halfbacks in the game. You'll find his story on p. 10.

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