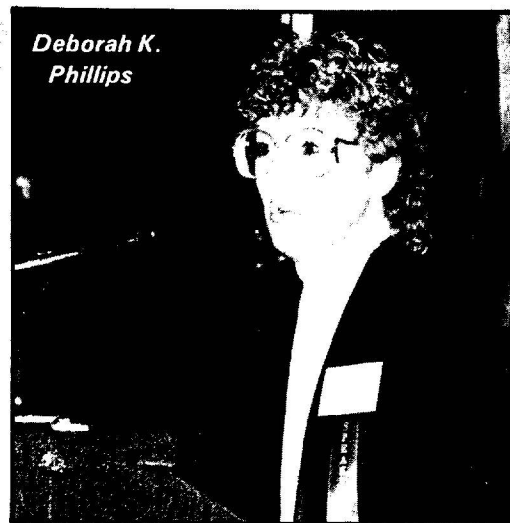


Persistence And Good Education Pays Off For Disabled

by Deborah Phillips



I come from a long line of non-conformists — my mother's heart is on the wrong side, and I have an undiagnosed disability. When my parents discovered that my disability was developing (I lost the use of my arms when I was 7 years old), they, as non-conformists do, disregarded the advice of the experts and kept me in the parochial school where I was enrolled and never treated me differently from anyone else.

The important thing to remember about dealing with people who have disabilities is that there are many resources in the community from which to get help. My office happens to be one, and there are similar commissioners' offices in most of the major metropolitan areas. I admit there are only a few female commissioners and directors of these offices, but as women with disabilities, that just means we have a double problem to overcome.

Our office is part of the metropolitan city government, and we've been in existence for five years — not as part of the mayor's office, but as part of the Department of Human Services and the Department of Welfare. Our job is two-fold: One is to serve disabled people and the other is to serve the

city of St. Louis. We have the interesting position of being a non-political body whose primary function for city government is to advise and confer.

Anyone who works with architects or engineers knows that there is absolutely nothing you can tell them about accessibility. We came into some money two years ago, and the chief architect for the city decided to make City Hall accessible. He contacted me for my input, and I suggested he make one set of the public bathrooms accessible and that he lower the telephones — things like that. There are also about one thousand steps just to get to the front door of the building. We've convinced our board of public service to give us the money, so hopefully the Civil Courts building will be accessible for mobility impaired people.

This is the kind of work we do, and this is the kind of resource we try to be for organizations like Paraquad.

We don't take the approach that everyone is alike. Our approach is to match the individual person to the resources that meet the needs of that person. You have to articulate your needs. It's very important, especially in Missouri, to be persistent. It is very low in

legislation for the disabled, and because of that, some of the metropolitan areas like St. Louis and Kansas City have been more progressive. When dealing with a metropolitan municipal part of government, you need to present your information in a concise way. It's persistence and perseverance that's kept us in business, and we're fortunate that the city considers us one of its priorities.

I never went to a special school, and I don't feel cheated or warped from the experience. I've always had the fortunate luck to have gotten a good education. Parents of disabled children need to realize that education is one way we can overcome and become part of the mainstream of society. Another way is to develop an excellent sense of humor.

It's important to remember that even though a person has a disability, it's exactly that, and that having a disability does not make us a homogenous group. Within our population is as much diversity as in any other population. And that's a good reason to have an office like mine and an organization like Paraquad to work together to help meet some of the needs of disabled persons. ●