



Herbert R. Willsmore

From Herbert Willsmore Papers: Autobiographical Summary

[ca. 1972]

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Autobiographical Summary

Herbert R. Willsmore

In February, 1966, I was involved in an auto accident and suffered a severe spinal cord injury from a broken neck. The injury left me a quadriplegic with total paralysis in my legs and partial paralysis in my arms and hands. After two years of physical and psychological adjustment, I came to the realization that I would spend the rest of my life confined to a wheelchair. I was now homebound, a burden, living with my parents. During this time I realized not only that I could no longer depend on my physical capabilities to earn a living, but that I now had to depend on others for basic living needs. I now needed help with bathing, dressing, getting in and out of bed, going up and down a curb, etc. I was left with but one major attribute, my mental ability.

Faced with the seeming inevitability of being sent to a nursing home once my parents were too old to take care of me, I began to ponder how I could capitalize on my mental ability to secure a more stable future. The obvious course was through higher education leading to a career which does not require the physical capabilities I no longer possess. I seized the opportunity to embark on this course when a friend notified me of a special residence program for severely disabled students at the University of California, Berkeley. I applied and was accepted. With some anxiety about leaving the sheltered environment of my parents home I came to Berkeley where I was sure that my mental ability would be sorely tested in academic competition with a select group of students.

While at home I had developed an interest in the operation of the stock market and the business world. I therefore chose business administration as my major. Because of the high living costs involving my disability, I knew I would have to earn a high salary and resolved that the world of high finance was the place to do it. During the first two years of fulfilling lower division

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requirements, I began to realize that perhaps business administration could not accommodate my evolving need to be involved in an activity which could offer more than financial reward. My experiences while living in the Cowell Residence Program were very rewarding in terms of helping me to overcome my disability and had much to do with my decision to prepare for a career in planning.

I was one of twelve severely disabled students living at Cowell. Most of us had just arrived and were previously living either with parents or in an institution. We all shared common problems and limitations and a common desire to achieve a greater level of independence. At mealtime and in the evenings we often talked about our problems and exchanged ideas about how to solve them. At first, discussion centered around self

care techniques: how to empty one's own urinal bag, how to put on a jacket without assistance, how to prevent bedsores or bladder infections. Later we focussed on problems involving some of the institutions affecting our lives: the Department of Social Welfare, the Department of Rehabilitation, the University and Hospital administrations. Having experienced considerable difficulty in dealing as individuals with these institutions we saw a need to organize our efforts. This led to the creation of the Rolling Quads disabled student organization and the Physically Disabled Students' Program (PDSP). Both have been almost entirely directed, planned, and implemented by a core group of severely disabled individuals who once lived at Cowell Hospital. For over two years the PDSP has provided informed advice, referral and advocacy services and has worked with local front-line and administrative personnel in social and rehabilitation agencies to help foster coherence and consistency in responding to individual client needs.

I have been actively involved in the operation of these two programs since their inception and it was through this activity that I was introduced to the City and Regional Planning Department. In the winter of 1971, I was invited to sit in on a two quarter graduate planning course, a workshop in program evaluation

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dealing with the delivery of rehabilitation services. The subject and content of the course were naturally interesting to me because of my experiences as a recipient of social and rehabilitation services and because of my involvement in the PDSP. I and many of my fellow disabled have been subject to actions and policies of rehabilitation agencies which heightened feelings of dependence and actually retarded movement toward independence. Through collective group action we began to isolate what we perceived as failures of the public social services system. The PDSP as an advocate of the disabled has been quite successful in dealing with these failures on an individual client basis but it has become apparent that dealing on this level is limited to treating the symptoms while having little effect on the basic problem. I feel there is clearly a need to deal with the system on a broader level if real progress is to be made in improving the opportunities available to disabled people in our society.

My continued involvement in the City and Regional Planning Department has encouraged me to rechannel my interest from business administration to preparation for a career in planning where I feel I can have an effective voice in the processes affecting my life and the lives of my fellow disabled. I am convinced that graduate study in this field can provide me with the necessary tools to work "within the system: to change what I perceive as an inadvertently misguided bureaucracy. A career in planning is a natural extension of my work in the PDSP and appears to offer considerable more than just financial reward.