

PROFILE

BEN PTAK, NATIONAL FINALIST HIS ORATION IS FROM THE HEART by Vincent Borelli, Coach

It was fitting for Ben Ptak to be a National Finalist in Oratory in Indianapolis in 1993. Ben's speech, "If It Bothers You, Please Leave the Room" focused on the plight of the disabled. In the speech he highlights the fight that people with disabilities have to overcome. The speech does not scold, preach, or seek to illicit pity but presents a forthright view of the subject. Ben was the only disabled speaker among nearly 200 orators. Remarkably, Ben's positive attitude, humorous personality, and common sense made a lasting impression on his fellow competitors and judges from across the nation. Ben's speech did more than win a top award at a National competition. The speech has been the motto and slogan for many organizations which fight for the rights of the disabled. Through his skillful efforts, Ben has spread the word, applying his forensic prowess to many causes through his speech. "If It Bothers You, Please Leave the Room" has caused many organizations in his area of New Jersey to reconsider their views about the disabled person. Most recently, Ben presented his talk at the New Jersey Governor's Awards for Arts in Education program in Trenton. New Jersey's leaders were impressed with his poise, words, and diligence. He received a standing ovation for his presentation. He also presented his speech at the Middlesex County Convention for Special Education impressing those educators as well. Ben learned much through the art of forensics. He is applying his knowledge every day beyond tournament and contest forums. He's reaching all in the community and truly making a difference through this

very valid art form.

The speech took two years to write. Ben's involvement with forensics started when he was a freshman at Long Branch (NJ) High School. He enrolled in speech and theatre, and continued his work in courses such as Acting, Forensics, Children's Theatre, Drama Performance Workshop, and Advanced Performance. His speech was the "cherry on top" of a brilliant career in speech and theatre. He has won numerous awards for his oratory and poetry performances. He won a Very Special Arts Award of New Jersey for theatre in 1991. During his senior year, 1992 - 1993, he began his forensic ascent reaching the zenith at the New Jersey District Competition in March when he earned the right to represent New Jersey at the Indianapolis Nationals in 1993. Fortunately, Mrs. Ptak saw Ben place first at a local New Jersey competition. She passed away suddenly the following week. Ben persevered and made his mother proud--he continued the "fight" she had supported, for the disabled! Interestingly, Ben was born in Indianapolis and returned there to place fifth in the nation in Oratory.

IF IT BOTHERS YOU, PLEASE LEAVE THE ROOM

by Ben Ptak

There is a Chinese proverb that goes: give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach him how to fish and he will eat for the rest of his life. Rehabilitation and access are necessary for a disabled person to be able to move from dependence to independence. Our society feels that because handicap is a disease -- like condition, we

should treat the disabled person as a "sick person", one who poses no threat but requires mature tolerance and pity, a vice masqueraded as virtue. Following the disease model, a handicapped person is seen as a deviant if he stays sick for too long. He receives disapproval, even contempt, for his failure to fulfill the sick or deviant role obligation -- that is, to get well.

The first hazard many disabled children face is demoralization, that can result from having one's competence as an individual constantly challenged while growing up. Not because one actually is incompetent but because the able-bodied think one is. Strangers are apt to talk loudly and slowly to us, pat our heads or address our companion, "What would he like to eat?", assuming that the wheelchair has rendered us deaf, mute, and incapable of coherent thought. This misperception has until recently been reinforced by the media which tended to portray the severely retarded individual, in a sense a perpetual child, as typical of all handicapped people. It is clear that societal prejudice always bears more impact on the handicapped than does the biological condition.

Society must learn to regard the disabled as members of an oppressed minority rather than as a patient or a social deviant.

The disabled have a rather low visibility in society and do not form a distinct cultural community, although the oppression we face bears a strong resemblance to that faced in another decade by the propo-

nents of racial equality. When looking at affirmative action, what has always been applied to color, must now be applied to the disabled. When buildings designed for public use are inaccessible to the handicapped, it is the same as if there were a sign outside saying NO CRIPPLES ALLOWED. Can you imagine what would happen today if a sign said NO BLACKS ALLOWED?

In 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King referred metaphorically to the "costs" confronting black people, costs that disabled people encounter literally. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. King said, "When the architects of our republic wrote the words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. So we have come to cash this check -- a check that will give us the riches of freedom and the security of justice."

It is only by increasing our investment in rehabilitation, barrier removal, and technology that we can make a meaningful dent in the huge costs incurred by keeping the disabled dependent. The economist Sylvia Porter has pointed out that America is spending \$10 on dependence for every dollar it expends on programs to enable the handicapped to become independent, taxpaying, visible, citizens. For every dollar spent on rehab, barrier removal, technology, \$9 are returned.

The new Americans with Disabilities Act promises to be "a clear and comprehensive prohibition of discrimination" if it is conscientiously enforced. I don't care where I have to sit on the bus just as long as I am enabled to get on it. Freedom from barriers benefits not only those who use wheelchairs but also mothers with baby carriages and our increasingly large elderly population who have trouble with stairs. So even if a store, theater, or hotel owner isn't too crazy about the handicapped, it is pretty hard to knock mothers and old people. And besides, it's the

law.

One of the more distinguishing characteristics of the disabled population is that it is an open one. Anyone may join it at any time. And disability doesn't discriminate about age, sex, race, or economic status. This past Fall while I was in rehab at the Dupont Institute following surgery, I met Rocky, a college basketball scholarship winner, Joey, a football player, and Robyn, a soccer team and cheerleader captain. They each had sustained spinal cord injury and could barely move from the neck down. We talked a lot about the future with both high expectation and fear. Our therapists' theme song could well have been taken from Mick Jagger's lyrics "Ain't gonna cry for you if you're lazy." We worked hard and received great encouragement for our efforts. We know that we are not responsible for being handicapped, but we do have the responsibility to overcome by joining in partnership with the temporarily able-bodied to remove barriers that cost all of us too much.

We are talking about a future that may become your own or someone close to you, as well as the 43 million Americans who are already disabled. Our problems will not be solved without forever altering the ways society perceives people who are disabled. Years have been added to life; now we must add life to years.