

Mark Susa and his personal support network build community in Warwick

Ever since Mark got his freedom machine, AKA manual wheelchair, while he was in preschool, he has been committed to getting out and about. For a while, that desire expressed itself in road racing, including four marathons, beginning while he was still a student at Toll Gate High School.

He has mellowed as he has aged and would now enjoy simply wheeling the three miles home from church on Sunday afternoons in good weather. Warwick Avenue presents the greatest barrier since crossing it safely almost triples his travel time.

Finding safe curb cuts at a light on both sides of the state road required his making a very wide loop. This prevented his arriving home in time for family dinner. On the other hand, skipping what Mark calls “strolling home” meant that he missed a significant part of his weekly exercise.

So Marni Levett, facilitator of Mark’s PLAN RI personal support network, called a meeting of the circle committed to ensuring a good life for Mark. John, Mark’s dad, explained the problem and garnered ideas. Marni, who works for an environmental protection group, also tapped the knowledge of accessibility experts in her company. She made handouts, and helped field-train the group on how to spot code-busting barriers to accessibility.

In the first training session, Mark approach a steep curb cut. The small front wheels of his wheelchair rested on the little ramp; the anti-tipping devices on the back dug into the macadam; and Mark’s large drive wheels spun uselessly in the air, trapping him in that spot until his champions could extricate him. Message received by the team: violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act for street and side-

walk accessibility result in genuine dangers for Mark and many others who use the busy thoroughfare.

The team dubbed themselves “Access Markers;” a cousin created the logo; Seth Dixon divided the length of Warwick Avenue into seven segments, approximately half a mile each. Then people signed up to conduct a review with Mark. They would park their car at one end of their assigned segment, measuring details and observing Mark’s progress, taking photographs and recording it all on data sheets. Then they would cross the street, carefully assessing the opposite side



Jim McClure, another committed member of Mark’s team, observed, “We drive on Warwick Avenue frequently, and were surprised to discover how many obstacles we had been blind to before. Seeing how dangerous it was for Mark and many others to navigate some of those areas was really eye-opening.”

Mark’s brother, Frank, lives on Warwick Avenue and uses a motorized scooter because of orthopedic problems. Having been forced to travel on the shoulder of the road by barriers such as telephone poles in the middle of sidewalk, he was happy to compile the evidence into a report, and his family submitted it as a complaint to the Federal Highway Administration. They received a formal letter of finding, listing a dozen violations that needed correction. Then they submitted it to the state Department of Transportation and received a promise “to expand the limits of the work to include adjacent repairs for more complete pedestrian access.” Mark’s response to learning that the federal and state governments would share the costs of funding the repairs? “Don’t worry; be happy.”