

Triumph

(continued from page 1)

In January, 1987, she was transferred to McGee Rehabilitation in Philadelphia, where she stayed on a floor devoted to spinal cord injuries and received therapy for the next four months.

"I had to learn balance, to sit up and to take care of myself - getting dressed, combing my hair, brushing my teeth - all over again," she said. "I got angry plenty of times."

She beat her goal, to be home in time for her mother's April 17 birthday, by eight days.

Coming home was another challenge.

Until special door handles and other modifications were made to her parents' house, Heidi fought an ongoing battle with standard doorknobs.

"I would get frustrated and shout, 'Why didn't you leave me one good hand?'" she said.

Although her employer, Red Rock Job Corps Center, had held her resident assistant's job open for her, Heidi realized that it would be too difficult.

"I had to learn fine motor skills so that I could learn to type and to write again," she said. Part of her therapy was removing pegs from a box and picking beads from sand.

"I called it beads and kitty litter," she joked.

Throughout her entire recovery, her parents, John and Annabell Allen, told her that she would have to prove to them that she couldn't do something before they would help her.

"I owe a lot to them for that," she said.

Finding a job was another hurdle.

For six years she sent resumes to every business and organization in the valley.

"I was trained to be a computer operator," she said. "I am very qualified to work with computers, but everyone told me that I wasn't. I could see it if I said that I wanted to be a brain surgeon. I learned that if someone tells me I'm not qualified, I'll ask them why."

Finally Ian Richardson at DocumentAutomation Corp. in Wilkes-Barre hired her, but Heidi still had to prove herself.

Within several months she had worked her way up to a job in quality control, in which she checked other employees' work for accuracy.

When DAC folded in February, 1993, Heidi resumed her job search.

The following September, after being interviewed at Sallie Mae for several different positions, she landed a part-time job as a computer operator, working four or five hours every day.

She learned telephone work and now has been given more responsibilities in her job, and has learned to drive a van equipped with a wheelchair lift and hand controls.

"When I was still in the emergency room at the General, I told my mother that I would probably never drive again," Heidi recalled. "She told me no way."

Although concerned about driving on ice and snow, the weather conditions which con-

tributed to her accident in 1986, Heidi drives herself to work and on errands.

Her next van will have four-wheel drive, she said.

"I owe Ian Richardson the world for hiring me," she said. "My job at DAC gave me the experience that I needed for a job at Sallie Mae."

Although she's the only person there in a wheelchair, she said her co-workers don't notice it. They see her for who she is.

"We have to be creative in order to survive, to think of ways to get around obstacles or handle situations."

Heidi Jo Allen
Rehabilitation award recipient

"We are capable of holding steady jobs and being productive in the workforce," Heidi said. "We have to be creative in order to survive, to think of ways to get around obstacles or handle situations."

Heidi has addressed area organizations on behalf of the physically challenged, believing that "by telling my story, I might be able to educate the public. We're not handicapped - the handicap only exists in others' mindsets. We're physically challenged. For every step that you take, I might take two or three. Every day we fight accessibility problems - no wheelchair ramps and restaurants with poorly designed doors, for example. Or our special parking spaces are abused by people who don't really need them."

Coping with people's reaction to her disability can be as challenging as stairs and ob-



POST PHOTO/GRACE R. DOVE
Sweet Valley resident Heidi Jo Allen uses a lift to get into the specially-equipped van she drives to work in Wilkes-Barre.

stacles, Heidi said. "People don't know what to do, how to react," she said. "Mothers sometimes tell their children not to look at us. Possibly they're afraid of us or don't understand us. Some of us actually have a sense of humor."

Laughter, Heidi believes, is truly the best medicine.

When her family tried to hide

her true physical condition from her because they feared that she would become suicidal, Heidi fired back:

"How can I? I can't shoot myself or jump off a bridge. I can't even overdose on medicines because I can't open those childproof caps. There's no reason for me to attempt suicide. I have too much to offer." She has also developed an

Heidi Allen, Nancy Dukes will be honored Sept. 22

Allied Services, an area not-for-profit health care system serving the physical and mental needs of the physically and mentally challenged, is the local and national sponsor of National Rehabilitation Week, observed September 18-24.

As part of the week's observances, Allied will hold a special luncheon September 22 in Scranton to present awards to local individuals and organizations who have worked on behalf of people with disabilities or those who have made significant steps in overcoming them.

Honorees are selected through nominations from the community, according to assistant vice-president in charge of corporate programs Alexandra Yantorn.

Allied has participated regionally and nationally in National Rehabilitation Week since 1976, Yantorn said.

Two regional honorees from the Back Mountain will receive plaques at the luncheon - Sweet Valley resident Heidi Jo Allen and Harveys Lake resident Nancy Dukes.

National award honorees include actress Annette Funicello and *Life Goes On* star Chris Burke, honored in 1990, who will be this year's featured speaker.

Co-sponsors are radio stations WARM and WMGS in Avoca. Allied Services operates seven satellite centers in the area, two hospitals (John Heinz Institute in Wilkes-Barre and Allied Services in Scranton), a home health care network, a medical equipment store and housing for the physically challenged in 11 Northeastern Pennsylvania counties.

It also provides vocational training for the physically and mentally challenged, some of whom eventually are able to bring the skills they have learned to jobs outside the Allied system.

The Allied system has 2,000 employees and services 3,000 clients a day.

by Grace R. Dove

arsenal of wisecracks for people who give her "nasty, evil stares." She can tell the difference between those and the curious, harmless stares which children give her.

Sometimes people talk over her, as if she's not there.

"People in wheelchairs aren't deaf and dumb," she said. "I can hear and speak as well as anyone."

Heidi was nominated for the National Rehabilitation Week award by her physical therapist, Jeff Pace, and co-workers at Sallie Mae.

"What makes receiving this award so nice is being recognized with people like Governor Casey, football player Michael

Utley, Annette Funicello and Jim Post," she said. "I'm on the same page in the newspaper with them."

She said that during Post's fight to be accepted at a medical school, she prayed for him constantly. She wanted to see him succeed.

Through her visits to area organizations, contact with the media and her daily activities, Heidi wants to pave the way for others who are challenged by lack of accessibility or rejection from others.

"It's their mindset that we're 'different' and should be treated differently," Heidi said. "We're not 'different.' We just do some things differently."

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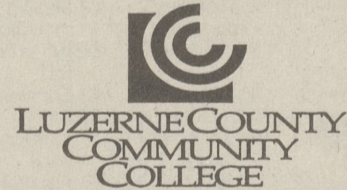
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