

How Did the Special Needs Committee Get Started?

Mark Hanigan

A member of STC's Special Needs Committee describes the history and goals of the Committee.

Perhaps you have seen the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, a story of an innocent man who spent 20 years in prison for a crime he did not commit. On one level, the story is of survival in the hostile prison environment and the evolution of a friendship between Andy and Red.

But on another level, the story is of hope and triumph of the human spirit, as Andy rises to victory over seemingly insurmountable and definitely unfair odds. What Andy teaches us is that life's greatest challenges—and their triumphs—come from meeting and overcoming the fears within ourselves. Once we win these battles, victories against external challenges are almost anticlimactic.

The STC Special Needs Committee is the "brainchild" of Judy Skinner. It is also, perhaps, an anticlimactic manifestation of her personal victory. You see, until one cold Dallas morning and a patch of black ice, Judy was rolling along through life the way most of us do . . . taking each day for granted.

In a matter of moments, Judy's vehicle met the black ice and a horrific automobile accident. She immediately found herself at the beginning of a long fight just to survive. And

anyone who knows the details of what Judy overcame knows also that she beat some very long odds.

Yes, Judy did survive, but the accident took from her the basic human capabilities that we all take for granted—walking, even being able to feed herself. No one but her, and those who have fought back from similar circumstances, can really appreciate what challenges lay ahead for her. I can imagine that depression and even despair were even more formidable foes than the physical therapy challenges. I can only imagine.

Over the years since that 1996 accident, I have watched my friend relearn basic functions and, in doing so, provide a most wonderful blueprint for courage! While the first two

years were mostly focused on this basic relearning,, the last two years have been a reclamation of Judy's position as a viable part of our professional community

Through the merger of these two challenges, Judy has felt moved to help others within our community who also face this duality. Thus, the Special Needs Committee was born.

Perhaps the introductory paragraphs of the committee's original proposal capture its focus best:

All persons, throughout their respective lives, are presented with challenges that they must meet — physical, mental, emotional, and situational. There is no "fairness" to the meting out of these challenges. However, the true triumphs of the human spirit are those of the victories over these challenges.

Further, a true measure of personal satisfaction for us all comes in helping ourselves, and in helping each other meet our personal challenges. These are truisms of life and truisms within the lives of our STC membership.

Providing overall support to meet these challenges is certainly outside of the charter of the Society for Technical Communication in general. However, providing support does fall within STC's domain when viewed in terms of helping our membership with special needs as they pertain to their professional technical communications careers and as they pertain to their capabilities to participate in STC programs and activities.

To address these special needs and challenges, we proposed the formation of a new membership issues committee, the Special Needs Committee. There are functioning technical communicators who are also STC members who are deaf, blind, wheelchair-bound, and otherwise challenged. Some STC members have faced these challenges victoriously, and others have provided an educated helping hand.

The charter of the Special Needs Committee is as follows: Help members with special needs achieve their potential by making available to them information about products and services that can assist them in career activities.

Judy has assembled a team of dynamic individuals to bring this committee's goals to fruition. Much work has been completed. You can learn about it through the committee's brochure, its articles, and its Web site. Yet there is much more to do as not all of the goals have been met. Yet,

knowing Judy, we will get there. When you look back at where she has been, this part of the trek is a "cakewalk."

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Mark Hanigan has served STC in various positions on the chapter, regional, and international levels, and will become Society president in May. He speaks frequently at STC regional and annual conferences.

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