

From Starfish to Butterfly ... the Amazing Story of the AccessAbility SIG

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This paper describes the remarkable history of the Society's newest Special Interest Group—the AccessAbility SIG—tracing it back to its origins in 1997 as the Special Needs Committee (SNC). The SNC, founded by Judy Skinner, was originally chartered to assist technical communicators with disabilities in the practice of our profession by researching and publicizing assistive technologies and techniques to overcome those limitations. Over its 5-year lifespan, the committee expanded its mission to include a second overarching goal—assisting all technical communicators in developing information products that are fully accessible to end users with disabilities. Its accomplishments included a data-rich yet eye-pleasing online newsletter, an ever-growing comprehensive web site that is becoming a definitive resource on accessibility, and a robust and dynamic listserv.

In 2002, the SNC was transformed into a SIG. The SIG grew rapidly, gaining significant subject matter expertise in accessibility that has carried it to the cutting edge of an emerging new specialty niche within the profession and an important part of the technical communicator's toolkit. Renamed the AccessAbility SIG in 2003, the organization now includes nearly 300 members representing a dozen nations. The SIG continues to expand its influence on, and contributions to, the new communications science of accessibility. It has also preserved its legacy as a support group—not just to technical communicators with disabilities, but, increasingly, to all who come to us with special needs.

"I'm reminded of the story about the beach strewn with starfish and the little girl picking them up and throwing them back in the ocean.

'Little girl,' a passer-by said, 'what are you doing?'

'I'm saving starfish,' she replied.

'But there are so many! Your efforts can't possibly make a difference.'

As she picked up another starfish, the little girl said, 'It makes a difference to that one.'

We ask you to help us make a difference."



Figure 1. Everybody counts. Boil the AccessAbility SIG down to two words, and those are the two.

Wow.

The starfish story is how Judy Skinner, founder of STC's Special Needs Committee in 1997, wrapped up her [landmark paper](#)¹ for the Proceedings of STC's 47th Annual International Conference (Skinner 220).

The lowly starfish (Figure 1) has gone on to become the organization's symbol of its "impossible dream"—the pursuit of universal accessibility.

Much water has run beneath the bridge since Skinner formed the committee, which has, over the past 8 years, grown into a unique international organization known as the [AccessAbility Special Interest Group \(SIG\)](#)²—possibly the only group of its kind in a professional association whose overall charter is not directly tied to disabilities.

At this point, as part of the STC Transformation, it is fitting for us as an organization to review our heritage and chart our course in fulfilling our dual mission: (1) helping technical communicators with disabilities find assistive technologies and techniques to help them in the practice of our profession, and (2) helping *all* technical communicators design information products that are fully accessible to end users with disabilities.

Following the course we charted in a special edition of our newsletter [Achieve!](#)³ at the 51st annual conference (Figure 2), let's pause to look back as we move forward.

Only a few short years ago, it seems, we were a committee of less than 20 members (the Special Needs Committee). Now, we are a dynamic and growing



Figure 2. At the 51st international conference, the AccessAbility SIG paused to consider its accomplishments and also to chart its future objectives.

Special Interest Group of nearly 250 members. These are, indeed, exciting times in the world of accessibility—and the AccessAbility SIG.

A few short years ago, Section 508 was a seating area at the Metropolitan Opera between Sections 507 and 509. Now, it is one of the hottest topics in usability as web site accessibility has moved onto the professional and public “radar screen.”

A few short years ago, an STC member with a disability who came to the STC annual conference was on his or her own. Now that member can access the comprehensive online [Guidelines for People with Special Needs](#),⁴ published well in advance of the conference, as well as an *Addendum* printed onsite following a close inspection of the facilities from the standpoint of mobility restrictions, visual and hearing loss, fatigue, and other considerations.

A few short years ago, the idea of having nearly 300 people passionately committed to the goal of universal accessibility seemed like an impossible dream. Now, it is a reality.

The journey actually dates to the morning of March 3, 1995, when Lone Star chapter member Judy Skinner nearly died in a horrifying head-on collision caused by a stretch of black ice on Route 377 near Roanoke, Texas. For eight and a half days she lay in a coma. Few expected her to survive. Well, survive she did—despite severe resulting mobility restrictions that redirected her flourishing career as a technical communicator.

Three years later, on May 19, 1998, the same Judy Skinner made her own way across the stage in Anaheim, California, with the aid of a walker, to accept her Associate Fellowship in the Society, to a round of thunderous applause that may never be matched. It was

a truly electrifying moment. There were few dry eyes in the house.

Judy founded the Special Needs Committee in 1997. Charter members included several long-time STC members who had either overcome disabilities to establish successful careers in technical communication or, while fully abled themselves, shared a commitment to the goal of ensuring equal opportunities for people with disabilities, inside and outside our profession.

Among them were Cynthia Lockley, recipient of the 2004 AccessAbility SIG Distinguished Service Award for her outstanding work on our exceptional web site², who has overcome mobility restrictions and chronic pain; Fabien Vais, current A-SIG manager and driving force behind the pace-setting *Guidelines for People with Special Needs* that have been published at the last four international conferences, who has overcome mobility restrictions resulting from a childhood bout with polio; Andy Malcolm, former STC secretary and prominent educator of deaf people; Mark Hanigan, former STC president and a close friend of Skinner’s; and several others who remain active today.

The writer joined the committee at the 46th international conference in Cincinnati in 1999 after unwittingly wandering into a “not-working” luncheon table and falling into the “clutches” of Lockley, Malcolm, and Hanigan. Initially, my role was to be the committee’s ethics specialist, since I had co-authored the Society’s “Ethical Guidelines” and had recently co-authored a college text on ethics in technical communication.

- **Approximately 43 million Americans have a disability**
- **Only 28% of working-age people with disabilities have a job**

Ethics, in fact, was my focus at the 47th international conference in Orlando in 2000, where I presented and published in the *Proceedings* on the subject “[The Ethics of Special Needs: It’s a Matter of Fairness.](#)”⁵ My research for this presentation added impetus to my personal commitment to the fledgling disabilities advocacy organization, coupling my deep respect for my colleagues who had overcome disabilities to practice our profession with a sudden awakening concerning the magnitude of the injustice faced by persons with disabilities in our “enlightened” society.

According to a survey by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), more than 32 million Americans of working age (that’s 18.7% of the population from 15 to 64) have a disability, using the definitions in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Under these definitions, the ADA

legislation cited 43 million Americans as having disabilities.

That's pretty sobering, if you ask me. Speaking of sobering statistics, try this one on for size: only 27.8% of working-age people with disabilities have jobs, compared to 76.8% of those without disabilities. And the picture gets even bleaker for minorities. Asserts Jesse Jackson:

People with disabilities have always been excluded from the bounty of our nation's resources. Minorities with disabilities, in particular, have been the most disenfranchised of the disenfranchised. It is time that we bring them into the fold as full, first-class participants in our society.

In 1995, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote that the plight of the people with disabilities reflected nothing less than a "regime of state-mandated segregation...that in its virulence and bigotry rivaled, and indeed paralleled, the worst excesses of Jim Crow"—*City of Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center*.

“People with disabilities have always been excluded from the bounty of our nation’s resources.”
--Rev. Jesse Jackson

So when Judy Skinner stepped down as manager of the Special Needs Committee in 2001 and asked me if I would be willing to succeed her—as if *anyone* could ever step into those shoes—there was little doubt what my answer was going to be. Little did I know, that decision was going to shape my STC life for the next 2 years.

Shortly before the 2002 conference, the Special Needs Committee, which consisted of approximately 20 people, learned that our committee was to be disbanded at the end of the year as part of a routine administrative procedure that limits standing committees. Problem is, nobody told us about this in advance—it came to us as a *fait accompli*.

After a short but understandable—albeit not all that productive—period of towel wringing and public ventilation, we settled down and realized that the change was not in any way a reflection upon what we had accomplished in our 5 years as a committee and that it was most positively viewed as a redirection rather than a termination, a beginning rather than an end.

Accordingly, we set about to reconfigure ourselves as a special interest group, or SIG. The process requires a minimum of 75 signatures on a petition. At the time we learned of the decision to disband the SNC, we had just over 2 months before the Nashville conference, where

we were planning to conduct a seven-topic progression, publish [Guidelines for People with Special Needs](#),⁶ host a networking luncheon table, and other initiatives related to accessibility.

In those 2 short months, our 20 members raised 106 signatures on petitions, and just before the conference, at its May meeting, the Board approved us as the Society's newest and smallest SIG.

To top that off, the progression was a resounding success, drawing 42 attendees (representing a quantum leap from the attendance the year before) who took part in 21 invigorating table-top presentations and discussions. The *Guidelines*, as well as an *Addendum* thereto that we published the day before the conference after an onsite inspection, was extremely well received. We published several articles in the *Proceedings* and posted a wealth of materials to the conference web site. (To review these and many other materials, see the [online archives](#)⁷ on our web site.)

We went into the summer still tingling from our success in Nashville and rarin' to scale new mountains as a SIG in the coming chapter year. Hardly had that year begun, however, when we ran afoul of the Society's recession-driven fiscal crunch. STC was forced by dwindling membership to institute a policy that SIGs had to be self-sustaining, meaning that their budgets could not exceed 80 percent of the total of the \$5 SIG fees raised by their membership. For a large, established SIG, that was a manageable challenge. As a fledgling SIG with just over a hundred members, we took that one right on the chin.

Suddenly, just when we thought it was safe to get back in the water, there we were again, swimming with sharks.

Merely to restore the budget we had been allocated each year as a Committee, the SIG, which had just finished growing by more than 500% in the Spring 2002 conversion from a committee, now faced the daunting prospect of having to increase from 106 members to nearly 300 in less than 6 months to secure the budget we needed to pursue our objectives. In all, that meant growing from a 20-person committee to a 300-person SIG—1500%—in less than a year.

Nobody could do that, right? Impossible.

Well, that's what they told international soccer star Michelle Akers when she was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS) in 1994. Nobody with that condition could possibly withstand a vigorous workout, let alone compete effectively as a world-class athlete. Impossible.

Fortunately, that word is not in Michelle Akers' vocabulary. After all, you're talking about a person who once took on three older boys to rescue her little brother when she was 8 years old. She brought the same attitude

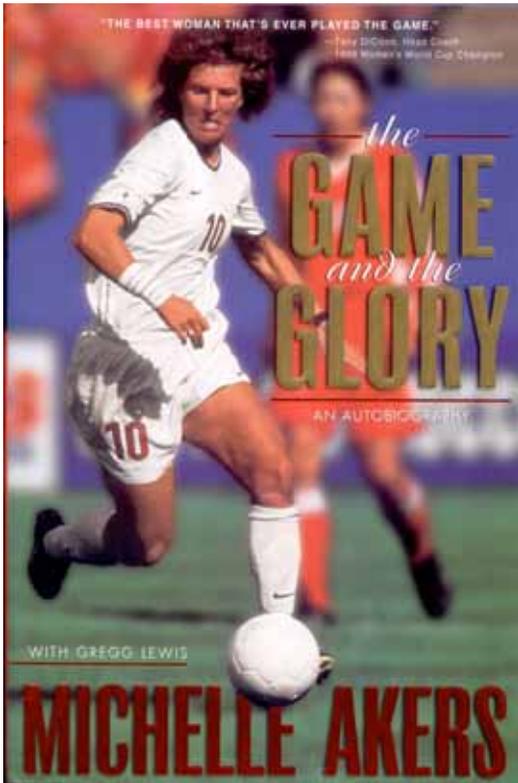


Figure 3. An interview with soccer star Michelle Akers provided an eye-opening education on the courage required to overcome a disability.

to the soccer field: “I loved to push myself. To go hard. To compete. To give everything I had. To overcome tough odds. And, of course, to win.” (Akers, 1999, p. 50)

As she told the author in a 2003 interview (Figure 3), captured in an [earlier paper](#),⁸ Michelle didn’t even consider failure an option. Neither did we. We responded to our staggering membership challenge by mounting a vigorous campaign—dubbed “Operation Starfish”— that stretched across the breadth and depth of STC. In the process, we formed valuable new friendships, forged formidable new alliances, gained valuable new resources.

When the dust settled on Operation Starfish, our membership stood at approximately 260—close enough to the goal that via a combination of a budget adjustment from our increased membership and various fund-raising initiatives, we remained fiscally viable, fully engaged, in hot pursuit of our objectives.

Which included an even more far-ranging progression in Dallas than the one in Nashville and an even more comprehensive [Guidelines for People with Special Needs](#).⁹

At that point, wrung out from our organization’s 2 years of almost continuous struggle against nearly impossible

odds—against which we had prevailed!—I handed over the managership of the Special Needs SIG to Fabien Vais of the Montreal Chapter. The baton was passed at the 50th international conference in Dallas in 2003, where our founder Judy Skinner received the new SIG’s first Distinguished Service Award (Figure 4).

Also in Dallas, we officially assumed our new identity as the AccessAbility SIG and adopted our new logo and motto (Figure 5), which combined the fierce independent determination required to overcome a disability with the commitment to work together to work towards the goal of universal accessibility.

Since then, I have remained active in both an advisory and a participatory role. It has been a source of immense personal pride and satisfaction to watch the organization continue to grow and expand its reach.

*“I loved to push myself. To overcome tough odds.”
--Michelle Akers, from a very early age*

From Dallas to now (Seattle), here are some of the landmark accomplishments of the AccessAbility SIG as this remarkable organization moves at the cutting edge of the quest for universal accessibility:

- An extremely successful fund-raiser in 2004 (selling butterfly lapel pins) which, coupled with a number of generous corporate and personal sponsorships, preserved the SIG’s fiscal foundation.
- Another highly successful conference at Baltimore in 2004, including our third [Guidelines for People with Special Needs](#).⁴



Figure 4. Judy Skinner, founder of the Special Needs Committee, accepts the SIG’s first Distinguished Service Award in Dallas, flanked by current A-SIG manager Fabien Vais (right) and previous manager Dan Voss, who won the second DSSA in 2004.



Figure 5. A SIG-wide mandate provided overwhelming approval of our new logo and motto.*

* The Wind Beneath Your Wings© Copyright 1999, Barbara Luther, <http://www.WindBeneathYourWings.com/>
The AccessAbility SIG acknowledges Barbara's kind permission to share her slogan.
For more information, see the [history of the SIG's logos](#).¹⁰

- Expanded participation in a robust and enlightening listserv, including regular contributions from such international experts on accessibility and usability as Mike Paciello and Whitney Quesenbery, respectively.
- Increased focus on international aspects of accessibility, led by Karen Mardahl of the Nordic chapter.
- Continued expansion of our dynamic and comprehensive web site,² under the capable hand of web “diva” Lockley and assistant Leslie Reed, of the Washington, D.C., chapter.
- More data-rich and inspiring editions of the online newsletter *Achieve!*,³ created by Mike Murray, president of the Orlando Chapter.
- Expanded research and publication in the field of accessibility, including the February 2006 edition of *Technical Communication*, which will be thematically dedicated to the subject. This publishing initiative, under the capable lead of Gail Lippincott, Ph.D., of the Orlando Chapter, was at the Call for Papers stage as this Proceedings article went to press; an update will be provided in the conference presentation.

- An exciting new grant project at Georgia College and State University (GCSU), under the guiding hand of A-SIG member and professor Gloria Reece, Ed.D., of the Atlanta Chapter, which, when fully funded, promises to place GCSU (and many active members of the AccessAbility SIG) on the leading edge of research on enabling technologies that will advance the cause of universal accessibility.
- And last, but certainly not least, the 52nd international conference at which this paper will be presented in 2005—highlighted by (1) our 4th *Conference Guidelines for People with Special Needs*, representing a partnership between veteran technical communicator Vais and University of Central Florida senior Jennifer Selix of the Orlando chapter; (2) a progression on Section 508 of the National Rehabilitation Act (web site accessibility) and a far-ranging panel discussion, both moderated by one of our “Green Berets” for Operation Starfish, Lori Gillen of the Boston Chapter; and (3) a highly informative and inspirational session, “Quantum Leaps,” where Rocky Mountain chapter member Maureen Hogg of Ball Aerospace, who is blind and deaf, demonstrates the assistive technologies that have enabled her to pursue a successful career in technical communication (Figure 6).

Maureen and I, in fact, will also be co-presenting at another session, entitled: “Same Methods, Different Disciplines: The Historian and Linguist as Technical Communicators.”

Maureen lost her hearing when she was 15 and her vision when she was 15 ½. Either one of those disabilities would have been enough to stop many people, but the combination has not stopped Maureen. It does not even appear to have slowed her down.

Not only does she maintain a full-time job as a technical communicator with Ball Aerospace, she is also an avid runner, cross-country skier (yes, you read that right!), and a walking encyclopedia of knowledge—not to mention the only grammarian ever to have defeated yours truly in hand-to-hand combat via public e-mail (ouch, that hurt!).

Staunchly independent, Maureen, like A-SIG manager Fabien Vais, is of the mind that people with disabilities should come more than halfway in seeking and achieving their own accommodations to their special needs—not sit around whining about others’ failure to accommodate them adequately.



Figure 6. Maureen Hogg demonstrates to her Rocky Mountain Chapter colleagues how she uses the Optacon and other the assistive technologies to communicate and perform her job.

In terms both of courage and success, both Judy Skinner's and Maureen's stories are strikingly similar to that of Michelle Akers, though in different venues. And there are dozens more stories equally compelling throughout the AccessAbility SIG.

SIG members linked by the highly active listserv provide expert counsel not only to practitioners with disabilities, but, increasingly, to others who come to us with compelling special needs—expert advice for a young man with macular degeneration; leads to providers of a customized computer keyboard for a user with one hand; online resources on arthritis, fibromyalgia, cerebral palsy, and other debilitating conditions—the list goes on.

In no instance has the SIG ever failed to reply to such requests—usually the result is *multiple* replies offering different perspectives, practical suggestions, and valuable leads to accommodating technologies.

If you ever feel like bowing before what appear to be insurmountable obstacles, consider the example set by our professional colleagues who have overcome disabilities that have denied them capabilities most of us take for granted to make their mark not only on our profession, but upon our fundamental human quest.

Consider, also, the sobering statistics on disabilities. The numbers are staggering—like the starfish scenario. Every day, the A-SIG continues to “rescue starfish.” Like Michelle Akers, we press on against all odds. We reach for the stars. We try to save every starfish.

Impossible?

It all depends upon whether that word is in your vocabulary.

In the A-SIG, we don't use it.

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Dan Voss has 26 years' experience in aerospace at LMMFC-O and he has also taught high school and college. He is a Fellow in the [Society for Technical Communication](http://www.stcsig.org)¹² and a member of [STC's Orlando Chapter](http://www.stcsig.org)¹³, where he managed the [Education Committee](http://www.stcsig.org)¹⁴ for 11 years. He has received the Chapter's Distinguished Service Award. He managed the STC's Special Needs SIG, now the [AccessAbility SIG](http://www.stcsig.org)², for 2 years, earned the SIG's Distinguished Service Award, and remains an active leader. Voss has also served on STC's Professionalism, Ethics, Certification, and Strategic Planning committees. He has presented at 16 international and 9 regional STC conferences. With Lori Allen, he co-authored *Ethics in Technical Communication: Shades of Gray* (Wiley, 1997). He is the only non-engineer ever to earn LMMFC-O's Author-of-the-Year award. He has also published numerous articles in professional journals and other publications. He recently won two of Lockheed Martin's top awards for communication and performance for his leadership on a successful major proposal.

URLs for Hot Links:

- 1 <http://www.stcsig.org/sn/PDF/skinnerpaper.pdf>
- 2 <http://www.stcsig.org/sn/index.shtml>
- 3 <http://www.stcsig.org/sn/newsletter.shtml>
- 4 http://www.stcsig.org/sn/PDF/conference_guide_may04.pdf
- 5 http://www.stcsig.org/sn/PDF/Voss_Ethics.pdf
- 6 http://www.stcsig.org/sn/PDF/conference_guide_jun02.pdf
- 7 http://www.stcsig.org/sn/conference_session_mater.shtml
- 8 http://www.stcsig.org/sn/PDF/Voss_Soccer.pdf
- 9 http://www.stcsig.org/sn/PDF/conference_guide_may03.pdf
- 10 <http://www.stcsig.org/sn/history.shtml#logo>
- 11 <http://www.missilesandfirecontrol.com/>
- 12 <http://www.stc.org>
- 13 <http://www.stc-orlando.org/>
- 14 <http://www.stc-orlando.org/education/education.asp>