

# Serving Special Needs in Technical Communication

By Dan Voss

*Some 43 million Americans have disabilities, under the definitions provided in the American Disabilities Act. Only one fourth of working-age Americans with disabilities who are capable of fully productive employment have jobs. Grim statistical realities like these prompted the Society for Technical Communication to form a Special Needs Committee (SNC) to address the needs of its members (as well as its end users) who have disabilities. This article provides a brief history of the SNC, outlines its goals and objectives, and introduces some of its members. The SNC welcomes the development of a "sister" group within the American Translators Association (ATA), and would like to pool resources to help fellow professionals whose careers—and lives—have been derailed by disabilities.*

*Note: This article was published originally in the February 2001 issue of the ATA Chronicle and is reprinted with the permission of the ATA.*

## **6:45 a.m., March 3, 1995, Route 377, near Roanoke, Texas**

Black ice—invisible but deadly. In the dim pre-dawn light, a razor-thin layer of this treacherous substance changed Judy Skinner's life.

One moment, the talented and personable technical communicator was on her way to a morning workout, duly seat-belted and shoulder-harnessed into her 1984 Nissan pickup and observing the posted speed limit. Seconds later, her vehicle hit the slick surface, careened wildly, and slammed head-on into another pickup in the oncoming lane of traffic.

The other driver's seatbelt held and he escaped with minor injuries, but Skinner's shoulder harness spooled on impact, sending her hurtling head-first into the dashboard.

For eight and a half days, Skinner lay in a coma in the intensive care unit of a nearby hospital, clinging to life in spite of severe head trauma and extensive internal injuries.

## **7:30 p.m., May 19, 1998, 45th Annual STC International Conference, Anaheim, California**

"And the final STC Associate Fellow to be recognized this evening is—" (There was a brief pause as the speaker fought for composure.) "—Judith Skinner."

A thunderous ovation rocked the banquet hall as several hundred STC members rose as one to honor their courageous colleague.

Slowly, with the aid of a walker but under her own power, Judy Skinner made her way across the stage to receive her award while her colleagues cheered and wept—openly, unabashedly.

"This was an emotional highlight of my life," Skinner said later. "Looking back, I know I could not possibly have gotten through my experience without the support of my family, friends, and professional colleagues."

Physically, Judy Skinner will never regain the full abilities she had before her accident. Her internal injuries have healed, but her near-fatal head trauma has left her with a severe deficit in balance, restricted mobility, and other neuromuscular impairments.

Intellectually, Skinner claims she can tell the difference, but that difference is not discernible to her colleagues.

Emotionally and spiritually, she has leveraged her misfortune to grow stronger. "I learned to focus on what I still *have* and on what I have *gained*, not on what I have *lost*," she explained.

Judy Skinner's full-time employment as a technical writer with a computer manufacturer ended on Route 377, but her career as a technical communicator was headed in a whole new direction. Today, on full disability due to her physical limitations, Skinner nonetheless manages STC's Special Needs Committee (SNC) from her home in Argyle, Texas. In this role, she has coupled her direct, no-nonsense communication style—leavened by her warm good humor—with her own experiences to become an articulate leader and spokesperson for the group.

Judy Skinner's experience is a stark reminder that we are all only a heartbeat away from a life-altering injury or illness over which we have no control.

Indeed, 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 percent of the population from 15 to 64) have a disability. To see what classifies as a disability, we refer to the definition of the term in the American Disabilities Act:

A person with a disability is one with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual...[These include] caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, working, and participating in community activities.

Under this definition, the ADA legislation cited 43 million Americans as having disabilities. That's a grim statistic. Even more sobering is the fact that only 27.8 percent of

working-age people with disabilities have jobs, compared to 76.8 percent of those without disabilities. And the picture gets even bleaker for minorities with disabilities. 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*.

Why have we failed for so long, as a society, to correct this injustice? Because it costs money. It costs more to equip public buses with wheelchair lifts; to retrofit public restrooms with accessible facilities; to purchase speech recognition software or Braille keyboards; or to install telephone devices for the deaf. The American Disabilities Act (1990) was born out of a sense of our collective social responsibility to open up opportunities to those with special needs.

The ADA was, and is, a good step in the right direction. But the still-lagging employment statistics for those with disabilities, for example, indicate that those who are abled, as a group, have a long way yet to go before re-enfranchising a large segment of the population with equal opportunity to contribute to and enjoy the bounties of our nation's resources.

The 1997-98 progress report on national disability policy concluded:

...the rate of progress is slower and less steady than many in the community had hoped when ADA was enacted into law.

For people with disabilities to truly accomplish the vision of ADA, it is critical that our nation's administration work with leaders in Congress to forge a disability agenda that brings children and adults with disabilities into the mainstream of American life.

Yes, there has been progress, but much remains to be done.

Like any profession, technical communication shares this important challenge. There are approximately 23,000 members in the Society for Technical Communication, and though the STC is the largest single organization for the profession, it represents only about a quarter of the practitioners in just this nation.

Applying the 18.7 percent statistic cited earlier, that means roughly 4,300 members of the STC worldwide, and nearly 20,000 technical communicators in the U.S. alone, are practicing their craft with a disability. Moreover, we can reasonably conclude that a similar percentage of our end users have to overcome a disability to receive the information in the communication products we prepare for them.

It was with this realization that the STC activated the Special Needs Committee in May of 1999. Its charter is to “...provide information and resources to support technical communicators with special needs as well as to better serve end users with special needs.” Special needs, in turn, are defined as “physical or mental disabilities that impair a technical communicator's ability to practice the profession or impair an end user's ability to receive the information in technical communication products.”

The SNC roster currently numbers 17. More than half of its members have a disability of one kind or another—low vision, hearing impairment, mobility restriction, cognitive dysfunction. The stories vary. The common thread is a staunch refusal to be defeated by the disability. Allow me to introduce a few of my colleagues:

### ***Fabien Vais, Dollard-Des-Orneaux, Quebec, Canada***

“I had polio at the age of two, approximately 48 years ago. This was in my native Tunisia. They said it was probably from the water, but my polio was apparently the only case in the country at the time...just my luck! At the beginning, I couldn't even sit up, but quickly my upper body became virtually ‘normal.’

Not so my legs. Today, I wear a [brace] on my right leg, since its muscles are atrophied and too weak to bear my weight. My left leg is only slightly stronger...Although it can bear my weight, it tires very fast. This is why I walk with the help of two canes. I am quite mobile. I drive a ‘regular’ automatic car, I teach in several schools, I can go up and down stairs, etc. However, I'm unable to do ‘simple’ things, such as holding my wife's hand while we take a walk, or carrying a box of pizza from the kitchen to the dining room.

Occasionally, I choose to use a wheelchair, so as not to tire myself out unnecessarily. This has helped me to notice accessible and non-accessible places, and to become a staunch activist in a couple of situations (calling for the manager, raising my voice, demanding changes, etc.)

This is why I was happy to join the Special Needs Committee in its fight to make this world (starting with our industry) a better place for people with special needs—who still have a good brain.”

### ***Connie Kiernan, Bowie, Maryland***

“My particular problem is severe osteoarthritis, which has challenged me for over 15 years, although the car accident in 1985 also caused other problems too numerous to mention.

What many people...don’t realize is that although someone isn’t in a wheelchair or on crutches, physical challenges may keep them from fully enjoying the benefits of STC events.”

### ***Jodie Gilmore, Washougal, Washington***

“I am legally blind (which entitles me to a tax cut—there ARE some advantages!), can’t drive a car, can’t read road signs unless I do a chin-up on them, have bad depth perception, and can’t recognize even good friends at any distance, visually.

What this ‘handicap’ means for me as a technical writer is that site visits are hard (since I can’t drive and work from home), I can’t see software demos very well looking over an SME’s shoulder, and I need special stands and a drafting table so I can get close to my reading/writing/computer without compromising my posture (which leads to neck and back problems).

At conferences, I have trouble seeing signs that are placed above eye level, have trouble finding room numbers, and so on. Big print, bold colors on signs, and good maps are very helpful!”

### ***Andy Malcolm, West Henrietta, New York***

“I do fall now into one group that has special needs within STC, and that is older workers. I continue to work, although I hit 70 this year. If being ‘elderly’ is a disability, it is a good one to have when you consider the alternative....”

### ***Sue Lowing, West Trenton, New Jersey***

“I started developing physical problems in 1994 that eventually led to diagnoses of lupus and fibromyalgia (sort of like muscular rheumatism all over your body). Those conditions have led to several other diseases, including progressive nerve cell death (axonopathy), peripheral neuropathy in both hands, feet, left leg, and arm, and kidney disease.

The major reason for my becoming totally disabled was the extreme pain and fatigue and the increasing cognitive dysfunction, which became very noticeable at work and at home.

Currently, I can walk short distances, mostly using a cane or walking stick. I cannot stand still for long, sit still for long, read for long (early cataracts from the disease process), and cannot always speak well (vocal chord spasms), and a lot of other things I won’t even go into. I use electric scooters when I expect to be covering any great distance.

Please have patience with me as my brain does not function as well as it used to, but I occasionally have flashes of brilliance.”

### ***Fabien Vais (in reply)***

“The end of Sue’s story is quite revealing. We often feel like apologizing for our ‘special needs.’ That’s what we need to change! To ask people to be patient with us is OK, but we certainly have nothing to apologize about.”

### ***Judy Skinner, Argyle, Texas***

“I’m disabled from an auto accident in 1995. I had a lot of internal injuries plus a head injury that left me with bad balance and hypertonicity. I was in a coma for eight and a half days. Head injuries are similar to strokes in their outcomes.

I also have some peripheral nerve damage in my hands, and my left ankle was crushed and is still messed up. I’m in a wheelchair. I can walk with a walker for short distances, but very slowly. My balance being what it is, I’ve fallen often enough that I don’t walk when I’m alone in the house. My mobility is impaired enough that I can’t travel alone.

Cognitively, I can tell the difference but hardly anyone else can. I was very lucky. I’m thankful and I feel blessed for living.”

Needless to say, harnessing the energy and conviction of such individuals, coupled with strong support from the STC leadership, has produced outstanding results.

The STC is firmly committed to serving the needs of its members and users with disabilities, as evidenced by the inclusion of an objective in the 2000-2005 Strategic Plan devoted exclusively to this initiative. The objective includes two basic strategies—research and information sharing—along with 11 tactical sub-objectives and a timetable for achieving them (see Table 1).

**Table 1. The commitment of the STC to the needs of those with disabilities is evident in the emphasis placed on that initiative in its Strategic Plan for 2000-2005.**

<p><b>Objective 5: Provide information and resources to support technical communicators with special needs* as well as to better serve end users with special needs.</b></p>
<p>* Special needs are defined as physical or mental disabilities that impair a technical communicator's ability to practice the profession or impair an end user's ability to receive the information in technical communication products.</p>
<p><b>Strategy 5.1: Research and define the relationship of special needs to the practice of technical communication, considering both practitioners and end users.</b></p>
<p>5.1.1: Research, compile, and report demographic data on the prevalence of specific disabilities in the STC membership, in the profession, and in the end-user community. Professional Development (Special Needs), Office/01-02</p> <p>5.1.2: Using the outcome of this research, develop specific recommendations to guide the STC's strategic planning and activities in the area of special needs. Professional Development (Special Needs), Administration/01-02</p> <p>5.1.3: For each disability, identify methodologies and technologies that can help technical communicators with that need gain employment and practice their craft. Professional Development (Special Needs)/01-02</p> <p>5.1.4: For each disability, identify methodologies and technologies that technical communicators can use to make information more accessible to users with that need. Professional Development (Special Needs)/03-04</p> <p>5.1.5: Study the potential use of methods, such as telecommuting, for enhancing the employability of technical communicators with disabilities that limit travel. Professional Development (Special Needs)/02-03</p>
<p><b>Strategy 5.2: Heighten awareness of, and make information available about, special needs in technical communication.</b></p>
<p>5.2.1: Develop and maintain online repositories, such as a database and an online forum, where technical communicators can obtain resources pertaining to special needs. Professional Development (Special Needs)/01-02</p> <p>5.2.2: Publish articles in internal forums such as <i>Intercom</i>, SIG newsletters, and chapter newsletters. Professional Development (Special Needs)/00-01</p> <p>5.2.3: Provide guidance to STC leaders concerning the ethics and management of special needs through articles in <i>Tieline</i>. Professional Development (Special Needs)/00-01</p> <p>5.2.4: Publish articles in professional trade journals and in the journals and newsletters of other professional associations. Professional Development (Special Needs)/02-03</p> <p>5.2.5: Develop presentations for regional and international STC conferences. Professional Development, Conferences/00-01</p> <p>5.2.6: Encourage chapters to hold meetings devoted to the topic of special needs; develop a turnkey graphical or multimedia presentation and identify qualified speakers. Professional Development, Chapter Affairs/01-02</p>

As this article went to press, the SNC reported it was on track to meet the three tactical sub-objectives scheduled for completion in the 2000-2001 chapter year. Efforts were also underway on three of the five sub-objectives on the docket for 2001-2002 and on one of two slated for 2002-2003.

On behalf of STC's Special Needs Committee, I would like to invite the ATA to form a similar group to address the special needs of its members (as well as its end users) who have disabilities. We would be pleased to share what we have learned and to work together toward a common goal that would be well pursued by all professional associations.

And, quite frankly, we are excited about the prospect of tapping into the professional expertise your organization represents when it comes to dealing with special languages

such as Braille and ASL created specifically to improve the communication ability of people with disabilities.

Obviously, disabilities don't stop at international, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. ATA and STC, together, could take a giant step toward traversing those boundaries and working to help professionals whose careers—and lives—have been derailed by disabilities to get them back on track.

As Judy Skinner puts it, "All we need is a little help to meet a special need of one kind or another—that's the key that unlocks our abilities."

Yes, the statistics are daunting. And no, we can't help everyone. But is that any reason not to try?

Judy Skinner certainly doesn't think so. She closes her compelling article "My Brain Works...My Legs Don't! Let's Take the 'Dis' Out of Disabilities" (*Proceedings to the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual STC International Conference, 2000, p. 220*) with a story that is familiar to many, but which takes on a special poignancy in the context of helping those with disabilities:

"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.

**Daniel W. Voss**

Communications Manager, Anti-Armor Weapons Systems  
Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control - Orlando  
5600 Sand Lake Road, Orlando, FL 32819  
407-356-6508

daniel.w.voss@lmco.com

Dan Voss is a Fellow in the Society for Technical Communication and a member of the Orlando Chapter, where he manages the Education Committee and has received the Chapter's Distinguished Service Award. He also serves on the Society's Special Needs Committee and Strategic Planning and Vision Committee, and has presented at numerous international and regional conferences. In addition to his 23 years of aerospace experience, he has taught high school and college. He co-authored the college textbook, *Ethics in Technical Communication: Shades of Gray*, published by John Wiley and Sons, Inc., in 1997.