

Meet the STC Special Needs Committee: Many Stories, One Mission

By Dan Voss

The STC Special Needs Committee was formed in 1998. Its charter is to research special needs in technical communication to find and publish ways in which we can leverage technology both to help technical communicators with disabilities practice our profession and also to help end users with disabilities access information in the products we prepare.

To kick off this chapter year, the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication heard an inspiring presentation from one of its members, Maureen Hogg, concerning how she has translated her professional skills in technical communication into a flourishing career with Ball Aerospace.

By any standard, the story of Maureen's professional success would have made for a valuable and informative chapter meeting. What made the occasion especially significant was the fact that in accomplishing her successes Maureen overcame a double challenge: she has been both deaf and blind since age 15.

It was through STC fellow George Hoerter of the Rocky Mountain Chapter, a colleague on STC's Special Needs Committee (SNC), that I had the privilege of "meeting" Maureen (so far only electronically!) and inviting her to join our committee, an overture which I am pleased to report she has accepted.

Maureen's compelling success story is matched by several others on our SNC. Consider, for example, the case of our manager emeritus, Judy Skinner of the Lone Star Chapter, who was the driving force behind the establishment of the SNC in 1998 and who managed the group's day-to-day operations for its first 2 years.

Unlike Maureen, Judy was a fully abled technical communicator who suddenly had to adjust to a serious disability. Her life changed forever at 6:45 a.m. on March 3, 1995, on Route 377, near Roanoke, Texas. 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 "black ice"—invisible but deadly. It 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 Judy's shoulder harness spooled on impact, sending her hurtling into the dashboard. For eight and a half days, Judy 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.

Three years later, at the 45th International STC Conference in Anaheim, California, Judy became an Associate Fellow in the Society. In between, she learned first-hand the challenges of overcoming a serious disability. She has drawn upon her experience to lead the SNC with vision, understanding, and compassion.

Several other members of our committee have overcome disabilities to flourish both professionally and personally—there's a full story behind each and every one of them (which, by the way, they would be more than glad to share with you—just drop them an e-mail...see our roster [Attachment 1]).

Fabien Vais of the Montreal Chapter, who has overcome a mobility restriction resulting from a childhood bout with polio, has led this year's effort to establish guidelines to enable Nashville conference attendees with disabilities to maximize the benefit they derive from the event and work around potential problems.

Lori Allen of the Jacksonville Chapter has prevailed in a long struggle with fibromyalgia—a capricious and ill-understood neuromuscular disorder that can inflict debilitating pain—to

pursue a highly successful career as a college professor in technical communication.

Lori Gillen of the Boston Chapter has learned how to work around an auditory impairment to develop her career in technical communication. The first-hand experiences she shared with fellow SNC members at our working session at the Chicago conference in 2001 not only increased our insight into the unique challenges this disability creates for technical communicators, it also helped Lori recognize the need never to be apologetic about her disability—simply factual and assertive in dealing with it. (Hats off to Fabien for his leadership in that regard—ask him to share the story about when people complained about his moving to the front of a long bank teller line because of the difficulty it represented for him with his mobility restriction.)

Kim McConnell of the Central Ohio Chapter, is our newest member. Like several other committee members, Kim counts herself among those who have been blessed with full physical capabilities. She is, however, the loving parent of a child who was left with serious physical and cognitive disabilities after an accident early in life. Kim, whose work involves accessibility to Web-based information, thus had both a professional and a personal commitment to enabling people with special needs. She is the self-appointed leader of our first official chapter-level special needs committee—with a plan to pilot an awareness campaign on special needs in technical communication.

I could go on (our roster is 21 deep), but you get the picture. Well, actually just a small part of the picture. While the SNC has certainly served as an inspirational support group for each other, that is actually a collateral benefit of our primary mission—which is to research special needs in technical communication to find and publish ways in which we can leverage technology both to help technical communicators with disabilities practice our profession and also to help end users with disabilities access information in the products we prepare. The committee's strategic plan, with goals, objectives, and implementing strategies, is summarized in Attachment 2.

The research and communication initiative, which is by definition a continuous and open-ended process, is off to a vigorous start. Over the past 2 years, the SNC has produced an award-winning informational brochure (hats off to Jodie Gilmore of the Willamette Valley Chapter, its chief architect, who is legally blind) and an equally stellar Web site (with kudos to Webmistress Cynthia Lockley of the Washington, D.C., Chapter, who has overcome a mobility restriction as well as a pain management challenge). The Web site is showing ever-increasing activity as we start to join forces with others in the business/technical community who share our concern for working the issues faced by members of the workforce who have disabilities. The Web site is at http://www.stcregion.org/special_needs/index.shtml; the brochure content is integrated therein under “About the Special Needs Committee.”

Accessibility of technical information to end users with disabilities is a major focus for the SNC at this 49th Annual STC Conference. Led by Gloria Reece of the Atlanta Chapter, who is presenting at four sessions and has published three papers in the *Proceedings*, we have lashed up with the new Usability Stem under the gifted leadership of Whitney Quesenbery of the Philadelphia Metro Chapter to bring our expertise to this vital area.

For example, implementation of Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is widely expected to usher in a new and enlightened philosophy of inclusivity in Web design. In a few short years we have moved from a disturbingly widespread and narrow-minded view that using special HTML techniques such as restructuring tables to make Web-based material accessible to automated text readers for the visually impaired was “a great waste of time and cost for a very small minority” (yes, I actually heard that remark, from a presenter at a conference in 1999—you can ask Andy Malcolm of the Rochester Chapter, who was at the same session) to a growing realization that we can no more in good conscience deny a segment of our population access to the global Internet than we can make public buildings

totally impenetrable to those with mobility restrictions.

The “very few” comment melts down very quickly in the face of the facts. Under the broad guidelines of the ADA, approximately 18.7 percent of Americans have some kind of physical, mental, or emotional disability. That’s more than 53 million people. Moreover, a survey by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research showed that of the population of fully employable people with disabilities, only 27.8% have jobs. That is a very sobering statistic—one that should jar the conscience of the nation.

A bit closer to home, the SNC is in the process of gathering data on the incidence of disabilities within our STC membership. Responses to a single query on a Fall 2001 member survey indicated that approximately 4 percent of STC members classify themselves as having a disability. While this is significantly lower than the numbers for the national workforce at large—owing perhaps to some uniquely restrictive aspects of our profession vis a vis communication-related disabilities such as auditory and visual impairments and mobility restrictions—it nonetheless represents a sizable population of our colleagues: approximately 1,000 people. And since the single question had, of necessity, to be rather simplistic, it is quite possible that the much more detailed online survey we are in the process of implementing will reveal a wider incidence of special needs within our population. More importantly, it will enable us to make at least an approximate breakdown of these statistics according to specific disability. That, in turn, will help us prioritize and direct our information-gathering and -sharing initiatives.

It really doesn’t matter whether we’re talking about 1,000 STC members, 2,000 STC members, 21 SNC members, or 53 million Americans. If one colleague with a disability is unfairly disadvantaged in the practice of our craft, if one person with a disability is disenfranchised from information in an age where information is everything, that is one too many. For too long, the odds have been stacked

unfairly against a large segment of our nation’s workforce, as well as a significant segment of our professional community in technical communication.

The SNC is seeking to lower those odds.

We invite your support.

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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 manages the Society’s Special Needs Committee, serves on the Strategic Planning and Vision Committee, and has presented at numerous international and regional conferences. He has 24 years of aerospace experience and has also 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.

Attachment 1

STC Special Needs Committee Roster February 1, 2002

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Attachment 2

SNC Strategic Plan: Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

Overarching Goal: Provide information and resources to support technical communicators with special needs* as well as to better serve end users with special needs.

* 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.

Objective 1. Research and define the relationship of special needs to the practice of technical communication, considering both practitioners and end users.

Implementing Strategies:

- 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. (01-02)
- 1.2 Using the outcome of this research, develop specific recommendations to guide the Society's strategic planning and activities in the area of special needs. (02-03)
- 1.3 For each disability, identify enabling methodologies and technologies that can help technical communicators with that need gain employment and practice their craft. (02-03)
- 1.4 Study the potential use of methods such as telecommuting for enhancing the employability of technical communicators with disabilities that limit travel. (02-03)

Objective 2. Heighten awareness of, and make information available about, special needs in technical communication.

Implementing Strategies:

- 2.1 Maintain and expand a Web site where technical communicators and end users can obtain resources pertaining to special needs. (01-02)
- 2.2 Continue to publish articles in internal forums such as Intercom, SIG newsletters, and chapter newsletters and in external forums such as professional trade journals and in the journals and newsletters of other professional associations. (01-02)
- 2.3 Develop presentations for regional and international STC conferences. (01-02)
- 2.4 Encourage chapters to hold meetings devoted to the topic of special needs; develop a turnkey graphical or multimedia presentation and identify qualified speakers. (02-03)

Objective 3. Assist technical communicators with special needs to derive maximum benefit from Society-sponsored educational opportunities.

Implementing Strategies:

- 3.1 Conduct site reviews, publish guidelines, and provide orientation to help attendees with special needs access information and surmount challenges at the international conference. (01-02)
- 3.2 Share lessons learned in 3.1 with regions and chapters to extend similar assistance at educational events at those levels.