

PUBLIC EYE

edited by Michael Gee



Neal Marshall

May we have our check please?

HOW TO 'GET IT'

It's a hot noisy moment at the Children's Museum, and the building is overflowing with kids of every description. There is a group of retarded children giving simulated weather reports on the museum's WKID-TV. There is a boy with crutches and braces taking a serious look at a modified version of a computer.

The Children's Museum is an old structure, and even with a portable ramp and a helpful and able-bodied staff access isn't very easy for handicapped people. "If you're in a wheelchair, it would be best of luck about getting from floor to floor." And as for the telephone, you can forget about that altogether," says Janet Kamien, the associate director of the museum's Visitor Center. "It's just one of those buildings, and to make it accessible for handicapped people is just beyond our means. I'll be a lot better when we move, though."

Kamien, who is in charge of the museum's special-needs program, is attempting to increase the public's awareness of the situations of people with impaired sight and hearing, physical handicaps, learning disabilities and mental retardation. She talks easily and enthusiastically about the subject, often sounding more like a community advocate than like a museum administrator.

Since the federal government promulgated tough regulations that require facilities funded by public money to be physically accessible to the handicapped, Kamien says, large numbers of people who had never encountered handicapped people before are now beginning to do so. "It's an integration, just like any minority integration," says Kamien. "The success of these laws depends upon the non-handicapped population. They just have not been prepared at all to cope with the influx of the handicapped in school systems or employment. We need to find

tools that will help non-handicapped people not to be embarrassed or frightened, or feel there is something at stake they don't understand."

As one of these educational tools, Kamien developed an exhibit called "What If I Couldn't?" (first shown three years ago), designed to help children understand what it is like to live with a handicap. The exhibit featured equipment like wheelchairs, canes and prosthetic arms and legs. Kids would handle this stuff, stare at themselves in the mirror in a wheelchair, walk across the space with a brace, a cane or a walker," says Kamien. "That takes the mystery away. You can better deal with a handicapped person if you know what the accommodations are."

The exhibit also included remedial devices like Braille typewriters, Braille dominoes and softballs with beepers for the blind. "One of the things you are dealing with is people's fear that it is going to happen to them, that they are going to get it," she says. "They don't want to be reminded. What these devices showed is that, in fact, life doesn't end, that you can keep on going. And that it might happen to you. It could. Some of this is going to happen to all of us as we get older."

There was surprisingly little protest at children's exposure to the subject. In fact, when Kamien saw parents copy down written explanations from the exhibit, she decided it was time to expand it into a book. The result was a volume aimed at junior-high students that is scheduled to be published by Scribner's in December. Kamien and others on the museum staff also spent a year developing the exhibit into a curriculum for use by third- and fourth-graders (it is now available for purchase or rental). Although Kamien has so far been unsuccessful in getting funding to take the exhibit around the country, from museum to museum, a revived "What If I Couldn't?" is slated to open the Children's Museum's planned "barrier-free" home on the Boston Waterfront next summer.

Kamien was a theater major in college but drifted into working with retarded people after graduation (she has now been at the Children's Museum for six years, first as volunteer intern, then as

THE COURSE OF HUMAN EVENTS

It's a simple bar tab from Joshua Brackett's place, detailing the copious amount of wine drunk by Capt. John Joy on a January night. Mr. Brackett's corporate logo is a bit more elaborate than the average. It ought to be, it's an original Paul Revere engraving. The bill was presented to Captain Joy in January of 1777 and is just one of the 360,000 17th- and 18th-century documents the Colonial Court Records Project is rescuing from obscurity and decay.

The records of the Inferior Court of Suffolk County (obviously not an image-conscious organization) wound up, appropriately enough, in the basement of the current county courthouse. And this lot of history was discovered by the way so much history is made: by accident. As Social Law Librarian Edgar Bellefontaine recalls, "The juvenile Court had to expand. They found these records, which were in fragile shape, and the library sort of came to the rescue." Fragile is an understatement. Tanned from age, the records crumble at the gentlest touch. Logically enough, the Project's first step was to hire a conservator, Kathryn Carey. Hers is an arduous task. "We wash each paper in distilled water," she said. "We buffer them to prevent acid decay and it's a good paper, so that should be enough to last for another 200 to 400 years."

At present, the main task for Project workers is classifying each document by year and case. At the records run from 1875 to 1830, there's a frightening backlog of old papers, crammed willy-nilly into tin boxes reaching to the ceiling. Led by archivist Charles Hammond, the men and women of the Project plunge ahead, demonstrating a zeal (doesn't usually associate with librarians). Of course, this is not the stereotypical academic quest; in part because of the reason for the enthusiasm displayed here is readily apparent to the layman: the



Janet Kamien: "You can keep on going."

manager of the Visitor Center, and now as associate director of the Center). In spite of her early uncertainty about a career, her identification with society's neglected seems to have been fairly constant. "When I think back about it, I always felt like a bit of a social outcast myself when I was in school. I was the kid who always stood in the outland and shouted, I got it, I got it, but the ball always landed three feet behind me. So I was always watching the other social outcasts in order to gauge how threatening the atmosphere was going to be for me. I paid a lot of attention to the kids who were in special classrooms down in the basement, who were designated as nerds and spazes."

Janet Kamien may not think of herself as a social outcast these days. For one thing, she just doesn't have the time. She's already trying to get funding for her next project, a video documentary. "I'm really excited about the idea," she says. "It would interview non-handicapped people who have close relationships with people who have a handicap of one variety or another. That's the next logical step for me."

— Neil Miller

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