

Professor hopes for miracle, cure for multiple sclerosis

By Suzanne Hoechstetter

Did you ever notice that the doors to the Academic Building open toward the outside? If you are like most people on Texas A&M's campus, you probably didn't notice or think that it mattered whether the doors swung in or out.

But Dr. Bonnie Browne notices details like that, because for the past eight years she has relied on a motorized wheelchair for transportation.

Browne, associate professor of political science, was diagnosed as having multiple sclerosis almost 10 years ago. MS is a degenerative disease of the nervous system which leads to paralysis.

Browne says she tries to stress what she can still do, but there are certain obstacles, such as the Academic Building's doors, that make it difficult for the physically disabled to function without others' help. If a person in a wheelchair wants to go into the Academic Building and nobody is there to open the door for them, they must back up while they open the door. That can be difficult or impossible when alone — especially with the stairs in front of the building.

Browne says A&M's campus is relatively easy to get around on because it's so flat and because Handicapped Services makes improvements each year by adding more ramps and curb cuts. However, the ramps are not always clearly marked, and employees sometimes lock the doors by the building ramps, which makes access a real problem, Browne says.

One of the biggest problems is when students park in spaces designated for the handicapped, Browne says. Another problem is steep ramps.

"One time I lost my brakes on a ramp in front of Bolton," she says. "I didn't want to gain speed and continue down the ramp, so I steered into the wall and my glasses broke against my face. There was blood everywhere and it was very dramatic because the ambulance took me to the hospital. I had to get stitches," she says, pointing to the scar.

"I realize that these problems and obstacles are unintentional," Browne says. "It's just that people don't think. They need to be more aware of disabled peoples' needs."

Browne says Mobility Awareness Day, sponsored by Handicapped Services in the spring, is an excellent way to become more aware of the disabled and the obstacles they face daily. People can get in a wheelchair

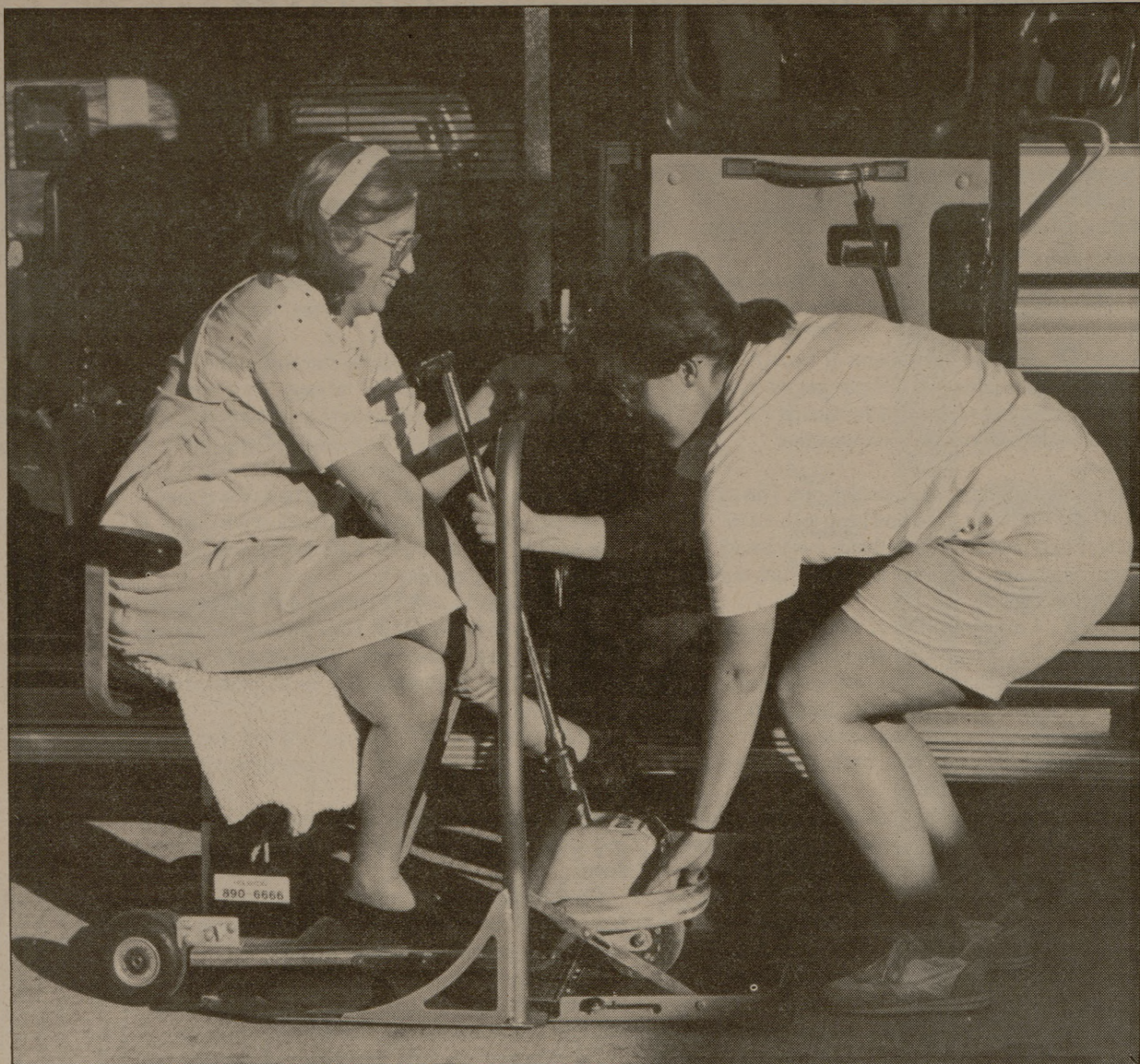


Photo by Dean Saito

Meme Stephens, a senior English major from San Antonio, devotes time as a full-time personal assistant to Dr. Bonnie Browne, who has been confined to a wheelchair for eight years due to multiple sclerosis.

and go around campus to see how hard it actually is, she says.

"One of my biggest complaints is how people refer to the disabled," Browne says. "'Handicapped' is the old term and I don't like it because it has images of being mentally handicapped. The newest term is 'the physically challenged.' I hate it because, let's face it, there are just a lot of things that I simply can't do! 'Disabled' is the word that I prefer people use. It's more descriptive.

"Challenges are fine, but I just want to be healthy," she says. "I want to walk!

"I know the emphasis is supposed to be on what you can do, but there are things that I can't do. I can't type or write anymore. My research assistant has to do that for me. I have to drink my coffee with a straw because I can't pick up my coffee cup," Browne says.

"But I don't think of myself as a sick person," she says. "I have this terrible disease, but I'm not sick."

A research assistant helps her get to class and grade tests.

"She's my hands and feet and sometimes my eyes," Browne says.

"It's very hard for me to put myself into others' hands and trust them to do things for me," she says. "A large part of it is to not be too shy to ask for help. You also have to keep a reasonable sense of self and have a good sense of humor."

When Browne became confined to her wheelchair she had to change her house as well as her lifestyle. She had to remove doors, widen doorways and replace steps with ramps. She also gives students free room and board in exchange for helping her at home. She is currently looking for student attendants because the ones she has now will be graduating soon.

"MS is very bad on fatigue," Browne says. "I have to do a lot of my work at home. But I don't have plans to retire anytime in the near future. They're going to have to drag me out of here feet first."

Browne lectures in two classes each week. She is currently writing a book on public policy toward women with the help of her research assistant.

At this time there is no cure for multiple sclerosis. Scientists in Houston are testing a series of drugs that may help MS victims, but almost all of them have negative side effects, Browne says.

"In the meantime, I'll just hope for a miracle," she says.