

Moving Over the Edge

Artists with Disabilities Take the Leap

Pamela Kay Walker

Introduction by Olivia Raynor, Ph.D.
Director, National Arts and Disability Center

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ISBN 0-9771505-2-6

LCCN 2005906754

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Printed in the U.S.A.
First printing, October 2005

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Book design by Molly Wanning, Wanning Design

*This book is dedicated to everyone who enjoys the works of Andrew Wyeth,
and to the dear friend who has been in my life the longest, Al Byers.*

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The reader is invited to take an artistic and historic journey.

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Childhood Dreams of being an artist gradually dissolve into a practical college education.

“Polio itself did not destroy my Dream, but there were stereotypes that defined what a girl who had been paralyzed by polio had a right to dream, and they didn’t include acting or singing.”

Postscript by Ramona J. Walker

19 Chapter Two: Five-oh-Four

Disability activism spreads across the country, pulling in many from the sidelines.

“On the heels of our country celebrating 200 years of independence, people with disabilities bring attention to the fact that they are still being left out of the formula.”

Postscript by Bill Blanchard

29 **Chapter Three: From Chaos to Creation**

An attitude of coping becomes an attitude of changing, with a new group identity emerging.

“I wrestled with wanting to belong, and yet not wanting to be stigmatized as being one of those ‘cripples’ we were taught to pity.”

Postscript by Corbett O’Toole

46 **Chapter Four: The “Disability Awareness” Fad**

Disability Art Fairs and Simulation Exercises are part of the 80s climate as the political gatherings nurture an artistic movement.

“Work, mutual friends, or political activities put artists with disabilities in contact with each other and we were compelled to keep that contact going.”

Postscript by Hannah Joyce Karpilow

54 **Chapter Five: Who Is Art?**

Four artists with disabilities and their artistic influences are presented: Kathy Martinez, Frank Moore, Cheryl Marie Wade, and Dave DeWeerd.

“These artists emerged at a time when there was little support and rare access for artists with disabilities in the mainstream art world, yet each of them made important creative contributions to that world.”

Postscript by Cheryl Marie Wade

71 **Chapter Six: Brief Intermission to Deal With Life**

SSI, SSDI, and AFTRA become a lawsuit of acronyms that the author attempts to unravel.

“I appealed. I appealed again. I was heard by a judge who ruled against me. I appealed again. I petitioned in District Court against the Social Security Administration.”

Postscript Concept by the author’s pseudonym, Calico

78 Chapter Seven: Able to Laugh

Comedy takes the stage in the Disability Arts Movement.

“If we can’t laugh at ourselves, who can?”

Postscript by David Roche

90 Chapter Eight: Superfest, CDT, and a Chat About Allies

Volunteer efforts of many help Superfest to grow from a small screening of works to the longest running international media festival on disabilities.

“Works that are submitted now are from/about people with a wide variety of disabilities as well as lesser known disabilities, such as environmental illnesses or trichotillomania (compulsive hair pulling).”

Postscript by Liane Chie Yasumoto

101 Chapter Nine: Wry Crips Disabled Women’s Theater Group

A radical group of women with disabilities hits the performance scene.

“They perform material that few have the courage to cover, subjects that are considered taboo or unmentionable in regards to disability.”

Postscript by Patty Overland

112 Chapter Ten: AXIS Dance Company

AXIS Dance company becomes one of the leaders in the development of a new dance form.

“AXIS quickly gained notoriety; they received many offers and began to perform in a variety of venues and styles, including work with Terry Sendgraff’s low-flying trapeze to develop an aerial piece.”

Postscript by Judith Smith

118 **Chapter Eleven: Moving Over The Edge (MOE)**

A disability rights activist, Bruce Curtis, becomes an artist and invites others to jump off the edge with him.

“Like a Pied Piper, Bruce pulled together a group of performers with and without disabilities to put on the first MOE show. It was a potluck of art forms and experience levels.”

Postscript by Bruce Curtis

128 **Chapter Twelve: The MOE Shows**

The period from 1988 to 1990 hosts four Moving Over the Edge shows, spotlighting many new and emerging artists.

“The cameras were kept running and comments were heard here and there, picked up by the unnoticed voyeur. It was clear that the audience had been left entertained, stunned, empowered, thrilled and illuminated.”

Postscript by Peni Hall

151 **Chapter Thirteen: Springboarding**

The MOE shows and other creative happenings spawn and nurture artists.

“The Bay Area gave birth to the Independent Living Movement in the ‘70’s and became alive with a fast-growing disability Arts Movement in the ‘80’s. Artists with disabilities began to emerge as a creative force.”

Postscript by Vicki VanSteenberg

158 **Chapter Fourteen: Into the Echo Chamber**

Five of the MOE Artists collaborate to create a short music video, “Dreamweave;” a video documentary is also made of their process.

“There were many times during the production of this video that I figuratively pulled my hair out; but now, many years removed, I look back on it as a fond experience. We came together and fed the artistic animal inside of us on a regular basis.”

Postscript by Avril Harris

167 Chapter Fifteen: Talent Bridge Begats PEP

New models are developed for supporting the inclusion of actors with disabilities on an equal playing field with their non-disabled peers.

“I was opening doors, but I needed people ready to go through the doors once they were open. My goal was not to create a separate agency where people with disabilities would cluster, but to create a bridge.”

Postscript by Rica Anderson

174 Chapter Sixteen: Hephaestus

A dynamic performance company experiments with images and perceptions for two productions and then disappears. Twice.

“We were invited to perform in Amsterdam, but the prospect was too overwhelming for three wheelchair-using artists with a show that used computers, live-effected video, and sound equipment.”

Postscript by Jay Yarnall

184 Chapter Seventeen: The Bittersweet

Employment disincentives and debates on professionalism are examples of the thorns among the roses for artists with disabilities.

“Artists have to develop thick skin and, for an artist with a disability, that skin might have to be even a little bit thicker.

Postscript by Tim Flannigan

200 Chapter Eighteen: Briefer Intermission to Deal With Life

The author receives the judges decision regarding her six-year legal battle with the Social Security Administration.

“Bottom Line: I lose my SSI every month I work as a union actress, even if I only work one hour.”

Postscript Poem by Pamela Walker

203 **Chapter Nineteen: ? – Disability Culture – ?**

The concept of a “Disability Culture” is explored.

“If a Disability Culture does exist, it includes artists who are not trying to pass, who don’t buy into an unspoken social rule saying we should be ashamed of our disabilities, and who often portray a self-acceptance and pride about who they are, not in spite of, nor because of, but including their disability.”

Postscript by Paul K. Longmore

211 **Chapter Twenty: Moving up and Moving Out**

Updates are given on many of the Bay Area artists from the 1980’s.

“I feel satisfied that the child in me has had the chance to explore a variety of art forms and styles.”

Postscript by Linda S. Stoltz

222 **Behindword**

The author gives concluding reflections on the importance of networking, mentoring, allies, video, collaboration, inclusion, optimism, and more.

“The same year that Wheaties showed a person in a wheelchair on their box, athletes who were disabled participated in the Olympics, and Playboy magazine portrayed its first noticeably disabled woman.”

Postscript To Thank

240 **Resources**

Contact information is given for many of the artists and organizations mentioned in the book. There are also a few extra resources thrown in for good measure.