

# Life in an Inclusive World



Illustration by Jon Krause



## The new Center on Disability Studies, Law, and Human Policy builds on a rich history of advocacy for the rights of people with disabilities in societies throughout the world

By Margaret Costello

Imagine a world with no stairs, where fire alarms and elevators are equipped with visual and audible signals, where doorways are wide, countertops low, and curbs are cut into clear pathways. More noticeable than its physical appearance, this world embraces all people and their unique strengths and impairments as simply part of what it means to be human. The variations in ability and appearance are treasured because this diversity enriches society and challenges people to expand their perceptions. "This is my world," says Liat Ben-Moshe, a doctoral student in sociology who specializes in women's studies and disability studies and uses a wheelchair. "If no building had stairs, I'd still have an impairment, but wouldn't be disabled. I know people consider me to be different, but I also know that's only because of what they believe normal is. And what they believe to be normal is socially constructed. It's not inherent in me; therefore, I can change it."

Ben-Moshe, an Israeli, and a growing number of students from across the globe are coming to Syracuse University to do just that: revolutionize the way the world perceives and interacts with people who have disabilities. Building on its long history in disability rights research, teaching, and advocacy, SU has launched the Center on Disability Studies, Law, and Human Policy, a collaborative project of the School of Education and College of Law, staffed by a team of faculty from across campus. The center expands the mission and work of the School of Education's 34-year-old Center on Human Policy by pulling together people from multiple disciplines to study disability as it relates to all aspects of life. "The center examines the conditions necessary for the optimal development of every citizen in the least restrictive environment," says School of Education Dean Louise Wilkinson. "We need to further research and create new knowledge to inform our policies, law, and practices. We also need to interpret and apply that knowledge to make our classrooms, schools, factories, religious institutions, families, and governments more responsive to individuals with disabilities. We need to evaluate how well we have created access and inclusion in all

aspects of life and improve areas that do not meet the mark. Doing so is both consistent with our commitment to an inclusive democracy and aligned with our laws. Who better to do that than Syracuse University, which pioneered the field of disability studies?"

In 1971, School of Education professor and future dean Burton Blatt founded the Center on Human Policy to expose and improve the despicable conditions he discovered within institutions for the mentally retarded while researching his book, *Christmas in Purgatory*. His photographic exposé stirred the nation into noticing a group of people who had silently been locked away from its view. Blatt and his successors at the Center for Human Policy have made great strides in moving people with disabilities from institutions into communities and creating a culture that is inclusive and supportive for all people. The center's faculty, who came from the School of Education, and staff brought the issue of inclusion, or mainstreaming, into such public institutions as schools, legislative chambers, and state-run residential facilities.

Because disability advocacy and research have widespread social implications, experts on campus saw a need to expand the scope of their work by drawing on the perspectives of more disciplines. In





Members of the Center on Disability Studies, Law, and Human Policy talk with Luis Benigno Gallegos Chiriboga (second from left), the permanent representative of Ecuador to the United Nations in New York and chair of a UN ad hoc committee on promoting international disability rights. Chiriboga gave a presentation on his UN committee work during a February visit to campus. Also pictured (from left) are education professors Steven Taylor and Beth Ferri and law professor Arlene Kanter.

2001, the need for a multidisciplinary center to study disability became obvious to a group of faculty members from across campus who had, until then, only met informally to share their research. They'd send students interested in disability studies to each other's classes and share news of speakers or conferences with each other. With the University's emphasis on interdisciplinary research and encouragement from Wilkinson and College of Law Dean Hannah Arterian, the group members formalized their relationship. They drafted a proposal for an interdisciplinary center focused on disability studies and set the wheels of progress in motion. "Syracuse has such a rich history in this area," Arterian says. "What makes this collaboration so exciting is the quality of the pieces. The faculty members involved in this center are powerful academics and dedicated advocates."

Education professor Steven Taylor G'77 and law professor Arlene Kanter—both known internationally for their work in disability studies—head the new center. They work collaboratively with faculty from different colleges, including professors Douglas Biklen (see "Inside Autism," page 7) and Beth Ferri, education; Robert Bogdan G'64, G'71, sociology; Nancy Mudrick, social work; and Michael Schwartz, law. "The rights and inclusion of people with disabilities in society can no longer be ignored," Kanter says. "More people with disabilities are speaking for themselves and are demanding that society

listen and respond." The center has the potential to change society's view from thinking that people with disabilities need a cure or treatment to recognizing that it is society that needs to be fixed—to respect the individuality and dignity of people of all abilities, Kanter says.

The center provides a home to several new academic degree and certificate programs springing up across campus, including the country's only three-year joint juris doctor (J.D.) and master's degree program in education, with a concentration in disability studies; and a three-year joint J.D. and master of social work degree program. It sponsors programs, speaker series, film series, conferences, and advocacy and law reform efforts. The center and its staff advocate on behalf of children and adults with disabilities who are as close as Syracuse and as far away as Turkey, and prepare legal briefs for what may well be precedent-setting cases. "The legal aspect of this collaboration is important," says Taylor, who served as the director of the Center on Human Policy for 23 years. "We've worked with clubs and organizations in the community before, but the ability to collaborate with the College of Law and its Public Interest Law Firm clinic enables us to have much more of an impact. Our visibility, on and off campus, will definitely increase."

Julie Morse G'05, a third-year law student and master's degree candidate in disability studies, plans



## CLEARING THE WAY FOR INCLUSION

**W**ith the creation of the Center on Disability Studies, Law, and Human Policy, Syracuse University strengthens its reputation in the field for progressive research, advocacy, and insightful education. It has also spurred many on campus to work toward changing society's attitudes toward people with disabilities—beginning in their own backyard. In recent years, several student organizations related to disability studies have sprung up on campus, most notably the Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee (BCCC) and the DisAbility Law Society (DLS). “What’s the point of having a great disability studies program if you can’t get from the parking lot into the classroom?” asks DLS co-founder Julie Morse G’05, a member of the BCCC and a third-year law student jointly enrolled in the disability studies master’s degree program at the School of Education.

In addition to advocating for improved accessibility on campus, these groups sponsor such activities as sign language classes, lectures by visiting speakers, and film series, including the BCCC’s latest, “Laughing With Us: Comedy and Disability.” “These kinds of programs send the message to students that we are welcoming to people with disabilities,” Morse says. “It shows that not only do we have these great academic

protocol be created if an elevator breaks and prevents a student in a wheelchair from getting to class? The group, in conjunction with members of the student advocacy groups and the University’s Office of Disability Services, is examining such issues and instituting new programs and policy manuals.

These kinds of changes need to be implemented if the University wants to continue attracting bright

students like Liat Ben-Moshe, a Ph.D. student who uses a wheelchair. The past president and current member of the BCCC came from the flat, desert terrain of Israel to the snowy hilltop of Syracuse University to study sociology at the Maxwell School and earn a certificate in disability studies through the School of Education. After missing several classes because she was unable to navigate the high snow banks lining the sidewalks, she began a campaign through the BCCC to examine the University’s snow-removal procedures, among other access concerns. “The first winter I figured I had problems because I wasn’t used to snow,” she says. But when Erzhenia Boudayeva G’05, a Russian graduate student who uses a wheelchair, said she had problems, too, Ben-Moshe knew something had to change. A subcommittee now meets regularly to address such issues as snow removal and has created a map outlining campus pathways that will be cleared first during a snowstorm.

“Changes are happening on campus,” says Michael Schwartz, the College of Law’s first deaf professor and one of only two in the country. As a Ph.D. student in the School of Education in 2001, Schwartz and a few students in a disability studies class founded the BCCC in response to a student with a visual impairment not receiving requested equipment from the University that was necessary for his coursework. “The BCCC was the spark that set everything on fire,” Schwartz says. “The new center will fuel that fire with innovative research and thinking. I’m delighted to see the environment on this campus changing, and I feel welcome here. I’m never going to retire. They’re going to have to carry me out feet first.”

—Margaret Costello



Julie Morse G’05, co-founder of the DisAbility Law Society



Sign language classes for the University community are one of the initiatives sponsored by the DisAbility Law Society.

programs in disability studies, but the University also accommodates people with disabilities and values their contributions.”

The University formed a working group to make the campus more hospitable to students, faculty, staff, and visitors with disabilities. The group addresses such topics as snow removal, accessible parking, building maintenance, and other University-wide policies related to the issue. For example, should a standard



on helping the new center get off to a strong start. A founding member of the DisAbility Law Society, Morse is the first College of Law student to receive a prestigious national Skadden Fellowship, which will fund her work after graduation as a liaison between Legal Services of Central New York (LSCNY), a local nonprofit organization, and the new center. Through the Inclusive Communities Project, Morse will educate the public about the rights of people with disabilities to live, work, and participate in community life. She will also coordinate legal services for people with disabilities to ensure they are integrated into communities. "There are a lot of people living in institutions who would prefer to be living in communities," Morse says. "But because of the way funding sources are structured or a lack of knowledge of the options, people remain in nursing homes, psychiatric facilities, or other institutions. It's important to give people a choice in where they will live."

Morse says the Skadden Fellowship will allow her to help meet the needs of an underserved population and solidify the connection between LSCNY and SU's new center, as well as other community resources. "There's so much room for collaboration in terms of referring cases to the law clinics or working with graduate students on resources for people with disabilities," she says. "Disability crosses all lines. It's not gender, age, class, or race specific. It intersects with every part of our culture."

Ben-Moshe says it is only fitting that the new center is multidisciplinary; disability studies encompasses everything from architecture students incorporating universal design concepts and engineering students crafting better cochlear implants to industrial design students conceptualizing more agile wheelchairs and filmmakers accurately portraying individuals with disabilities. "Disability is a form of diversity and should be



Liat Ben-Moshe

part of the University's commitment to expand people's horizons," Ben-Moshe says. "It can and should be instilled into the curriculum of every discipline."

Ben-Moshe and three other graduate students edited *Building Pedagogical Curb Cuts: Incorporating Disability into the University Classroom and Curriculum*, a guide for SU's teaching assistants and instructors on how to develop curricula that cater to all abilities. "If you construct a lesson plan that recognizes that not everybody can learn from just

hearing a lecture or seeing notes on the board—that people learn in a variety of ways—then you have an accessible classroom and curriculum," she says. "If you do that from the get-go, then you don't have to modify anything."

So far, the core group of faculty affiliated with the center comes from the School of Education, the College of Law, the Maxwell School, and the School of Social Work in the College of Human Services and Health Professions. But the group anticipates more faculty from a variety of disciplines will soon be involved in the research and advocacy projects. In fact, law professor Michael Schwartz rattles off a list of SU faculty members with whom he and the new center would like to collaborate on research projects.



Law professor Michael Schwartz, who is deaf, leads a class using sign language and an interpreter.



He hopes to do a qualitative research project with Taylor on the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which calls for uniform testing standards in American schools, exploring its impact on children with disabilities. Schwartz has already had conversations with geography professor Don Mitchell, who is interested in mapping the geography of disability locally. He envisions undertaking projects on gender, family, and disability with Marjorie DeVault, a professor of sociology and women's studies. "Cross-campus faculty members have their own perspectives that enrich our understanding of an issue," says Schwartz, who is deaf. "In the next 30 years, we're going to see some revolutionary activity going on with disability studies. Syracuse will be pushing the envelope and elevating the dialogue to a new level. The University will become synonymous with disability studies worldwide."

Law professor Arlene Kanter brings a wealth of international experience in disability studies to the center. Through the United Nations Disability Office, she already has secured several research projects for SU students to work on regarding the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and the World Bank. "For me, one of the most exciting parts of the center is the opportunity it presents to work with students on research and advocacy projects related to international human rights and disability," Kanter says. Last summer, at the request of Mental Disability Rights International, a human rights organization based in Washington, D.C., she and law student Nevhiz Calik G'05 traveled to Turkey to gather information about its mental institutions for a report on the country's commitment to human rights as part of its application to join the European Union. "Although Turkey has made great strides in conforming to international human rights standards generally, its treatment of people with mental illness remains unacceptable," Kanter says. "We'll suggest some reforms in the Turkish mental health laws and provide feedback to increase community services for people with disabilities who are now locked away, for as long as a lifetime, in Turkish institutions."

Calik, a native of Adana, Turkey, is excited to be part of an internationally emerging field. "Many countries have just started devoting funds to this

issue, and they are in desperate need of partners to collaborate with so they can come up with the best laws and practices to respond to their citizens' needs," Calik says. "I see the center as having an advisor/researcher role in the global community as these countries grapple with disability issues. The center will work closely with the countries and international organizations and make policy changes in the world. I feel privileged to be part of it."

Nancy Mudrick, director of the School of Social Work and a policy research specialist, looks forward to collaborating with Kanter and the other faculty affiliated with the new center, and to infusing disability studies into the curricula of all disciplines. "Disability is a human condition and can be looked at from many perspectives," Mudrick says. "That Syracuse has taken a step in that direction will be a real strength, as this is an area of growing inquiry. Society, as a whole, has begun to be more interested in disability as a characteristic of human beings. This center acknowledges the quality and reputation the University has built in disability studies and ensures that we will maintain our preeminence in the field."



Public administration student Erzhen Boudayeva G'05 maneuvers through the Syracuse snow. She is part of the Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee, a student-run organization seeking to improve access on campus.