

BROADCASTING HOPE

The Disability Network mixes compassion, commitment and controversy

BY SHONA MCKAY

As is its wont in Toronto, the winter weather has turned nasty. And that's a problem for 28-year-old Steve McPherson. Seated in an electric wheelchair by a window overlooking the grounds of West Park Hospital, McPherson, covered from shoulder to sneakers in a white thermal blanket, is telling a visitor that it's not the sleet nor skin-biting wind that concerns him. Rather, it's the clouds. A quadriplegic who has relied on a respirator for every breath since severing his spinal column in a diving accident nine years ago, McPherson knows that, without sunlight, the temperature in the room will fall slightly — a circumstance that can send his body into spasm. Occasionally, over the next hour, the anticipated happens.

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Yet the disobliging weather — and its consequences — does not dampen McPherson's spirits. Nor does it diminish his enthusiasm for the subject at hand, namely, *The Disability Network*, a weekly half-hour current affairs television program for the disabled commu-

nity, which airs nationally on CBC and CBC Newsworld. McPherson, who appeared on the program last spring to discuss his struggle to win the right to live independently in an apartment of his own, is one of the show's biggest fans. "No other program compares with *The Disability Network*," he says. "By presenting a realistic view of what people with disabilities can do and by showing that disabled people have choices, the program is heightening awareness and raising consciousness across the country."

Since the program, also called *D-Net*, made its debut last spring, such accolades have become the norm. The recipient of

scores of rave reviews in newspapers from coast to coast and the winner of an "Into the Mainstream" award from the Alliance of Cinema, Television and Radio Artists, the show has also earned the praise of thousands of disabled individuals across Canada. Among them is Mel Graham, communications officer at the Winnipeg-based Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped. Blind since birth, Graham knows both professionally and personally how important it is to gain greater public recognition for issues of disability. "It's vital that we make both the public and the government aware of our circumstances and needs," he says. "And *The Disability Network* is helping to achieve this goal. The program gives us both the profile and the credibility we need. It's the right show at the right time."

To understand why *D-Net* inspires such fierce loyalties, one need only tune in. Under the careful and professional handling of the show's two hosts, Joe Coughlin and Susanne Pettit, viewers are taken into a world characterized not only by enormous and sometimes shocking challenges but also by great courage and success.

Consider, for instance, the line-up of a recent show. Beginning with a round-up of information and news, including the plight of thousands of disabled orphans in Romania, the show proceeds to feature an item about the problems confronting disabled people in the great outdoors. While pointing out that barriers such as poorly designed buildings or camp sites often prevent disabled people from enjoying nature, the segment also profiles people who continue to fish, waterski and ride hot-air balloons in spite of physical challenges. Most memorable is the image of Ross Watson, a