

Professionalism and Credibility

No one—viewers or industry insiders—doubts that *The Disability Network's* success owes a great deal to Joe Coughlin and Susanne Pettit, the program's co-hosts.

Individually, the two bring a wide array of talents and experience to *D-Net*. For instance, before anchoring *The Disability Network*, 36-year-old Coughlin enjoyed a career as a jazz singer, radio and television commentator, employment equity and public relations consultant, corporate trainer and fund-raiser. Pettit, 38, also worked in a variety of disciplines before her appointment, including nursing, marketing, consulting and television.

rather have gone to the regular camp with my regular friends. As I grew older, the discrimination showed up in other ways. There are employers who won't consider you and governments that bog you down with red tape. Being disabled can be an extremely frustrating existence."

Pettit was born with cystic fibrosis, a condition that affects the lungs and therefore the body's immune system and is a leading killer of young people throughout North America. As a result, she also knows the difficulties that face people with disabilities. "The ignorance begins when you come into the world," she says. "In my case, the doctors in the hospital where I was born in Hamilton, Ont., advised my parents to let me die. Thankfully, they chose not to. Instead, they rushed me to the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, where I underwent an operation—the first of 14. It's a difficult life, a hooked-up-to-a-machine type of life. But it's nonetheless a life that can be—should be—lived with dignity and choices."

According to Victor Willi, head of the Centre for Independent Living in

Toronto, an organization that assists disabled people in controlling their own lives, the fact that both Coughlin and Pettit are disabled has much to do with *D-Net's* credibility. "Joe and Susanne are professional television hosts who compare with the best," he says. "But the fact that they walk the walk and can talk the talk of disabled people gives them a legitimacy that no able-bodied person could achieve."

Although they are united by their professionalism and personal history, it's also clear that Coughlin and Pettit's success as a team stems from their distinct character differences. "On air, Joe and Susanne appear as unique personalities," says Mel Gra-

ham, communications officer for the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped, in Winnipeg, and a regular contributor to *D-Net*. "Joe comes across as an activist, somebody who's ready to take to the ramparts to fight for people's rights, while Susanne presents a less radical, perhaps more compassionate and humanistic demeanour. Working together, they achieve a wonderful chemistry."

It's an assessment that the stars themselves accept. Says Pettit: "Like Joe, I can get angry about stupidity and viciousness. But unlike Joe, I'm much more comfortable expressing my excitement about a new scientific breakthrough than I am being antagonistic toward someone who is acting unjustly." Adds Coughlin, "Whether in my life or before the camera, I apply the philosophy of the Marines: the only way to deal with an obstacle is to go over, under or through it. Susanne takes a more humanistic approach. Together, we balance each other."

The Coughlin-Pettit duo complement each other in another crucial way: their differing types of disabilities. Coughlin, who is often to be seen on location using his crutches, represents the visibly disabled. Meanwhile Pettit, whose condition is not readily apparent to the casual observer, reflects the experience of the country's invisibly disabled people. "Both Susanne and Joe were chosen for their talents," says executive producer Peter Reynolds, who decided on his co-hosts after auditioning scores of would-be *D-Net* news anchor applicants. "But their different disabilities add to the program in an implicit way. Each time Joe appears, he's not only reporting a story, he's acting as a role model to other disabled viewers. Likewise, when Susanne appears, she's sending messages. Particularly, she's sending a message to able-bodied viewers that there are thousands of invisibly disabled Canadians out there who not only have special needs and concerns but who are also highly competent. And, above all, able."

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SUSANNE PETTIT



Along with their considerable employment credentials, Coughlin and Pettit also bring to *D-Net* another crucial qualification: a personal understanding of the issues confronting disabled people. Coughlin, a Windsor, Ont., native, was born with cerebral palsy, a condition that can cause both muscle incoordination and speech difficulties. In Coughlin's case, it has affected the muscles in his lower body and legs, giving him an intimate appreciation of the subtle ways in which society victimizes disabled people. "In my childhood, it took the form of segregated camps," he says. "I could not understand why, each summer, I was forced to attend a camp for kids with special needs when I would much