

blind Canadian and a member of an expedition that last winter climbed to the summit of Alaska's Mt. McKinley, the highest mountain in North America. The program also presents regular features, such as "Language Watch," which examines the words used to talk about disabilities.

Undoubtedly, *D-Net* owes its existence to Employment and Immigration Canada, the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto and the CBC, the three organizations that are providing start-up funding for the show. However, there's no question that the program's soul comes from — and belongs to — the community it serves. Particularly, *D-Net's* character owes much to the "independent living" philosophy. A self-help movement that started in California in the 1960s and now boasts centres in 76 countries around the world, including Canada, independent living promotes the view that disabled people have the right to control their own lives. Says Victor Willi, who lost the use of his arms and legs after a car accident in 1965 and now heads the Centre for Independent Living in Toronto Inc. (CILT), an organization that provides administration and thematic direction to *The Disability Network*: "The independent living movement is based on the belief that disabled people are neither sick nor charity cases. Rather, they are people who are entitled to make choices. Like everyone else, people with disabilities have the right to shape their own lives, work, take part in the community and take risks — even if that means falling flat on their faces. That's the message *D-Net* carries to viewers."

The independent living philosophy has certainly inspired *D-Net's* tough-minded and, at times, controversial reporting style. Says Coughlin: "I'm sure there are some viewers who are disturbed when we do a story, as we did, on a man who has taken up motorcycle riding again after losing the use of his legs in a motorcycle accident. And I'm sure there are others in our audience who shy away from frank discussions, such as the one we aired that dealt with society's attitude to aborting disabled fetuses. But we are not here to say that everything is sweetness and light or that everyone is doing a great job. There is a lot that is wrong out there, and we're here to talk about that and, if possible, incite change. Making people feel comfortable is not what we are about."

At *D-Net*, that message is not only preached but also practised — a truth

that becomes clear when one visits *The Disability Network's* busy office in downtown Toronto. Surrounded by walls decorated by Employment Equity posters, framed press clippings and production schedules, the seven full-time members of *D-Net's* staff are putting the finishing touches to the current week's program. Most of the staff are disabled. Says Pettit, "We represent a real cross section here. For instance, I am one of the oldest Canadians living with cystic fibrosis and Joe has cerebral palsy. Don Peuramaki, our senior producer, has polio; John Kass, our producer, is hearing and visually impaired, and our unit manager, Joe Ross, is a quadriplegic. We're quite a group." Willi agrees. "When you watch *D-Net*, what you see is not something that's being done 'for' disabled people," he says. "Instead, it's something that is being done 'by' people with disabilities."

That's a crucial distinction — and one that *D-Net's* executive producer, Peter Reynolds, insisted on when he took the proposal for the program to the CBC last

body," he notes. "Employers see that people with challenges can make excellent employees. And disabled people see that they, like the staff at *D-Net*, can take charge of their own lives."

Ultimately, *The Disability Network's* success will be determined by the number of staff it loses. "When we conceived *D-Net*, it wasn't our plan to create a ghetto for people with disabilities," says Reynolds. "Instead it was our intention to give individuals the opportunity to receive training and experiences in the media so that they might move on to mainstream jobs." Already the hope is being realized. Coughlin has been hired by both Newsworld and CBLT, the local Toronto CBC station, as a news anchor. Meanwhile, Pettit worked as a producer at *Midday*. Other staffers expect to follow their lead. Says Peuramaki, who enjoyed a career in both the recording and radio industries before moving over to *D-Net*: "Although I returned to radio during the summer break to train other disabled people in that medium, what I'd really like to do is move into mainstream



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year. Reynolds, a veteran independent producer who has had considerable experience with both disabled crews and disabled issues, believes, "Part of our mandate is to get badly needed information out. Every Canadian has to be made aware that there are more than three million disabled people in this country and that they are encountering problems. Whether you look at transportation, employment or living standards, the situation is dreadful." However, according to Reynolds, *The Disability Network* has an equally important task: to serve as an employment equity model. "By hiring disabled people and proving that they can produce a program that compares with the best that's out there, we're sending a clear signal to every-

television news. With my experience at *D-Net*, I think I'll achieve that goal."

In his hospital room, Steve McPherson acknowledges the importance of such optimism. For the past 18 months, he has fought both the medical profession and the Ontario government for the right to live independently in an apartment of his own, where he intends to establish a travel consultancy business that will cater to the disabled community. "If you can imagine how frustrating this process has been, you can also understand how good it feels to watch a television program that shows other people like me who are fighting and winning," he says. "For all disabled Canadians, *The Disability Network* is a steady source of inspiration — and hope." □