

by Tammy A. Lechner

Denny Caskey's first marriage failed in no uncertain terms. His ex-wife, he says, refused him one very basic right—the right to be disabled.

"I was never really allowed to be disabled by my first wife," explains Denny, "and so I tried to carry on as though I wasn't. It wore me out."

In sharp contrast, Denny's pres-

It was with that kind of an attitude that Denny entered his first marriage shortly after graduation from high school.

"I don't think our relationship suffered due to the handicap," says Denny. "But I think my wife had problems from the start with what other people would think about my handicap." His wife became increas-

Sharing More than Handicaps

ent marriage is a joy and a success. This difference is not because his first wife was able-bodied and his second wife is disabled, but he is now enjoying the right to be disabled himself.

Denny, a 36-year-old native of Louisville, has contended with paralysis from the waist down due to cerebral palsy since birth.

Early in his life Denny set his mind to follow a good bit of advice offered him by his father: "You're going to do the same things everyone else does, but you're going to be doing them just a little differently."

ingly concerned her image suffered due to his disability.

The in-laws were not helpful either, says Denny. For example, his father-in-law checked with the family doctor for assurance that none of Denny's offspring risked getting cerebral palsy.

But the children, two boys and one girl, were not at all inhibited or unaccepting of their father's handicap, says Denny.

"To the kids it was like they had a dad who wore glasses."

Yet his wife's attitude and his in-laws' attitudes were a burden. "I was encouraged to live with the feeling



The Caskeys accomplish chores with a dash of teamwork, a pinch of patience and a spoonful of determination. The couple loves to travel and when Denny's children visit in the summer, they travel to nearby sights. Both like to get away at least once a week for a fun event. They are greeted above by the Big Bird mascot at a football game. At right, Denny hands his wife keys to their new apartment.



that if you ignore something (the handicap), maybe it will just go away."

An example of Denny's attempt to ignore his disability during his first marriage were the two jobs that kept him on a 16-hour per day schedule for most of his marriage.

In 1970 he began a 13-year stay with Pepsi Cola. First he worked as the city sales manager, basically a dispatching job. His second position with Pepsi was as the "tel-sel" manager which was largely a customer service job.

For eight of his years at Pepsi, Denny also worked full-time for Dial America Marketing in telephone sales. He blames these long work days, which were necessary at the time for finances, as a contributing factor to the divorce.

"I think my wife and I grew apart without being aware of it happening and we found ourselves eventually out of touch with each other," says Denny.

The failure of Denny's first marriage caused him to consider marrying a disabled female even before he met his present wife who is disabled.

"There never are any guarantees," he says, "no matter what you do. I thought perhaps a woman with a handicap would have a different level of compassion and understanding for my handicap. However, it is the other interests we share that's making it work, not our handicaps," he says.

Denny met Mary Ann, 38, through a mutual friend. She relies on a wheelchair also; rheumatoid arthritis has disabled her legs, as well as her feet and hands.

Denny and Mary Ann plan their menu for several weeks at a time so they won't have to make more than one or two trips to the store each month.



About two years prior to her involvement with Denny, Mary Ann began attending the University of Louisville. She moved from her parents' home in the suburbs into an on-campus apartment and was feeling, she says, a bit lost.

"Leaving home to live alone on campus was the hardest thing I ever did," she says. "It was like walking to the edge of a cliff, jumping off and hoping you land on something before falling too far.

"After all, I spent many of my teenage and early adult years confined to a bed. I could never go anywhere or do anything without help. Then suddenly there I was on my own."

Mary Ann's search for independence impressed Denny and reminded him of his own search for direction. It didn't take long for the couple to realize they were meant for each other. After a few months of dating, they were married.

"With Denny I've discovered so much... like a kid in a candy store,"

Mary Ann says. "I learned that we can go anywhere, do anything we want. For Denny the sky is the limit. I've learned a lot about independence through him."

The couple live in a suburban Louisville apartment and travel in a van equipped with a hydraulic lift and hand pedals.

The van, he says, is "a symbol of our independence," as are the motorized wheelchairs the couple uses. But dependence on the wheelchairs can be frustrating too. Monthly trips to the grocery store take an entire day. The couple split up the aisles, to speed up the shopping routine.

The perception of the handicapped as helpless is an ill-conceived stereotype the couple would like to change.

"To say we don't wake up with frustration every day isn't true, but the only thing that really matters is how you deal with the frustration," says Mary Ann.

Mary Ann completed work last summer towards a degree in com-

munications and works as a part-time public relations writer for the University of Louisville. She is now also working toward a master's degree in elementary education.

As for Denny, he said his wife reinforced much of his determination to succeed in life. He left Pepsi to pursue a degree in radio broadcasting. The degree will supplement an associate's degree Denny holds. "She also gave me back my sense of humor," he says.

"We truly have enhanced each other's self-image through our relationship," says Mary Ann. "We've given each other a release to be yourself, to like yourself, to enjoy yourself and to feel totally comfortable with another person.

"We know of couples," she continues, "who married each other because of their handicaps, but have since divorced. A marriage lasts because of love," she concludes, "not because both people are handicapped."