Developing My Beat

By Nancy A. Jaekle

Winning a national fellowship to the University of Maryland's school of Specialized Journalism really launched my career. I had made it! Everyone seemed to have a newfound respect for me. I was no longer a novice with a disability who happened to get a lucky break; rather, I was admired for my writing talent.

This achievement could not have happened at a better time. Due to the advanced technology of computers, newspapers were a dying industry, and in 1992 the Daily Journal folded. As a result, many of the staff were let go. However, I was one of the fortunate ones to be transferred to one of our sister newspapers, The Suburban News, a weekly newspaper within the chain of North Jersey newspapers.

Working for the Suburban News, I was able to expand my health beat to writing a health section, where I covered a variety of health-related issues. It was challenging and tapped into my creativity as well. Unfortunately at that time, my editor had a child born with a deadly heart defect and needed to be away from the office a lot. I was on my own. In a sense, I had free reign. I covered the same hospitals, and they supplied my transportation when I needed to be physically present. So between a tape recorder and a phone speaker system, I was able to cover my stories.

This reminds me of a few rather unusual experiences I encountered while writing these stories. For instance, I covered the University Hospital of Staten Island, that wanted me to write an article about their pediatric urology department. Most of us never think of a child being born where it is difficult to distinguish the sex unless some sort of work-up it done. These doctors wanted me to come see them in person, so they sent a white extended limousine to pick me up. This limo was complete with a bar and all of the amenities one could want. My colleagues were envious, but I felt like a queen.

Another memorable time occurred with Marlboro State Psychiatric Hospital. The director gave me the grand tour and wanted me to do a series of article about common psychiatric problems
found in teenagers. He suggested we all get together for lunch in a nearby restaurant. So I, with seven psychiatrists, dined at a local high-end restaurant. These doctors were very gracious and answered all of my questions as I passed around the tape recorder. I explained that the benefit of the tape recorder was accuracy.

Prior to officially starting the medical beat, I had written a general letter to the medical director of each hospital explaining my interest and my disability. I thought it was only fair that they would be prepared since we were stepping on uncharted land. Everyone was very receptive, and I really did not encounter discrimination of any kind. I'm sure there were a few doubts, but once they read the articles and saw how accurate they were, all doubts were alleviated.

Nancy A. Jaekle worked as a freelance journalist and as a staff and features writer for North Jersey Newspaper Company for 24 years. She lives in Stow, Ohio, and can be reached at 234-678-7898. She has athetoid cerebral palsy and has been working to adjust to additional challenges from cervical myelopathy, which took away her ability to walk and perform many other daily skills. She has contributed many stories about her life to Network.