

It's Accessible, It's Electric, It's Fascinating

• phil draper •

When I first saw Telegraph Avenue—that was about mid-1970—it had just been torn up and repaved with new street corners. But the thing that struck me the most was that there were curb cuts on Telegraph Ave. What a beautiful sight!

The previous 12 years of my life I didn't have an electric wheelchair, so curb cuts didn't have much of an effect on me as I was unable to push my chair and my world of mobility was pretty much limited to my apartment or within one block of where I lived.

Now that I had an electric wheelchair, for the first time, I was able to really experience mobility and was able to go as far as the Telegraph Ave curb cuts would allow me, which was up Telegraph from Dwight Way to Bancroft and down the other side of Dwight.

Otherwise, I, or anyone else in a wheelchair, would have to go down driveways to go most places, except where, as in South Berkeley area, some of the curb corners were almost flush with the street.

Using driveways was a very dangerous proposition. But, if anyone wanted to get around Berkeley—such as on Shattuck Ave, University Ave., or the community itself—your only choice was to take a risk and use the driveways to get from one place to another.

Since curb cuts at that time were required by state law to be incorporated only under new sidewalk construction, installing them in all areas would have virtually taken a hundred years to complete.

To accelerate curb cuts, people from the Center for Independent Living and University of California's Physically Disabled Students Program decided to approach the City of Berkeley with a plan to put curb cuts throughout Berkeley.

Those individuals approached the Public Works Department of Berkeley with their idea, but immediately met with negative feedback, such as: "This has never been done before," "It can't be done," and "You won't be able to get it approved."

So, faced with this "great support", we decided to write our own city resolution.

We then presented this before the City Council and successfully had it adopted. In essence, the proposition called for \$30,000 per year to be used for the construction of curb cuts. With input from the disabled community on the location of the curb cuts, within a short period of time, Berkeley became the most accessible city anywhere.

The attitudes towards disabled people shopping in the stores on Telegraph varied. Some of the stores made serious attempts in accommodating people using wheelchairs—that is, they provided enough room in aisles. Some store owners blatantly or covertly did not want disabled people in their establishments.



“ . . . Berkeley became the most accessible city anywhere.”

In one case in particular, a record store owner (no longer in business for several years now) told disabled persons to stay out of his store, we did not belong there—we should be in hospitals. He was confronted about our rights as citizens and even though he finally acquiesced, he didn't like it.

Telegraph Ave merchants, and businesses in most parts of Berkeley, generally accept people with disabilities and make their places accessible. I believe this can be attributed to the large number of disabled people here; we are no longer an oddity, plus we do have buying power. Also, city ordinances, under certain circumstances, require accessibility.

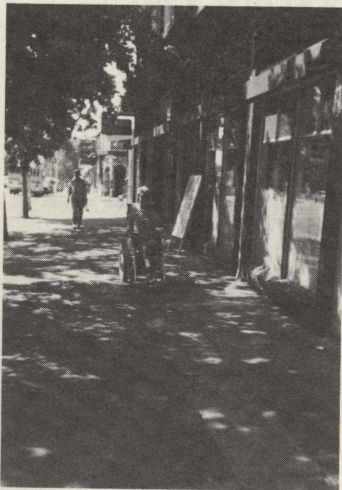
Because Telegraph is close to the University of California, and U.C. has a social and economic impact on Berkeley and Telegraph, I believe Telegraph reflects a composite of all the good and bad aspects of society—it has students and people from all sectors of the greater U.S. community, students from all over the world, many different races, cultures, attitudes; and, somehow, all this seems to have left a temporary and permanent stamp on Telegraph Ave. Therefore, when we, the disabled, became an active part of Telegraph, our acceptance came in a less prejudicial fashion because of this mixed atmosphere.

As we all know, Berkeley has always been considered the bedroom of change which tries many different methods and ways. Some succeed and some fail. Telegraph is an example of Berkeley's willingness to experiment.

In some ways, Telegraph hasn't changed much over the last 12 years. We still have street people, panhandlers, students . . . their faces are different and

even their politics are different. There are, however, more of us (disabled) going up and down Telegraph at all different hours of the day—some are students and some of us are ordinary Berkeley residents.

One of the more cheerful and exciting facets of Telegraph—I liken this to a carnival atmosphere—are the street vendors, particularly on weekends with warm weather and during the holidays. Telegraph becomes an exciting, electric, and fascinating place. People from all over come to shop and buy “something off of Telegraph.” There seems to be some sort of a special feeling about purchasing stuff from the street merchants.



Telegraph then becomes a place of forced harmony where you see people from all walks of life standing together, talking to each other, and even sitting across from one another at one of the eating establishments. It's too bad this is only a temporary situation.

Telegraph still has its little shops of this and that. Unfortunately, many of them do not last long, but then again there's always somebody lurking around the corner to open up some type of business. Telegraph certainly doesn't lack for those of us who like to fulfill our gastronomic needs, particularly with the fact that there's such variety.

Thank goodness for some closures—the blood collection center a few doors up from CIL, which certainly drew up on some of Berkeley's most famous residents, is no longer there. But, we still have some of the better and most well-known establishments, such as Cody's, Moe's—which has moved to a better and bigger location on Telegraph—Larry Blake's, Shakespeare's, Berkeley Market, La Fiesta, Eclair's, Grodins. . . . Most of the store fronts have changed one or more times.

Still part of the Telegraph scene are the street musicians that entertain the pedestrians; and it now has an additional attraction in the breakdancers.

Telegraph seems to have a little of something for everybody. Just what is the secret of Telegraph is something of a mystery because there are similar places around the Bay Area, but none has the same drawing power, excitement, and electricity that Telegraph Ave does on weekends. But then again, who really cares, if people come here to be happy and do find pleasure on Telegraph Ave.