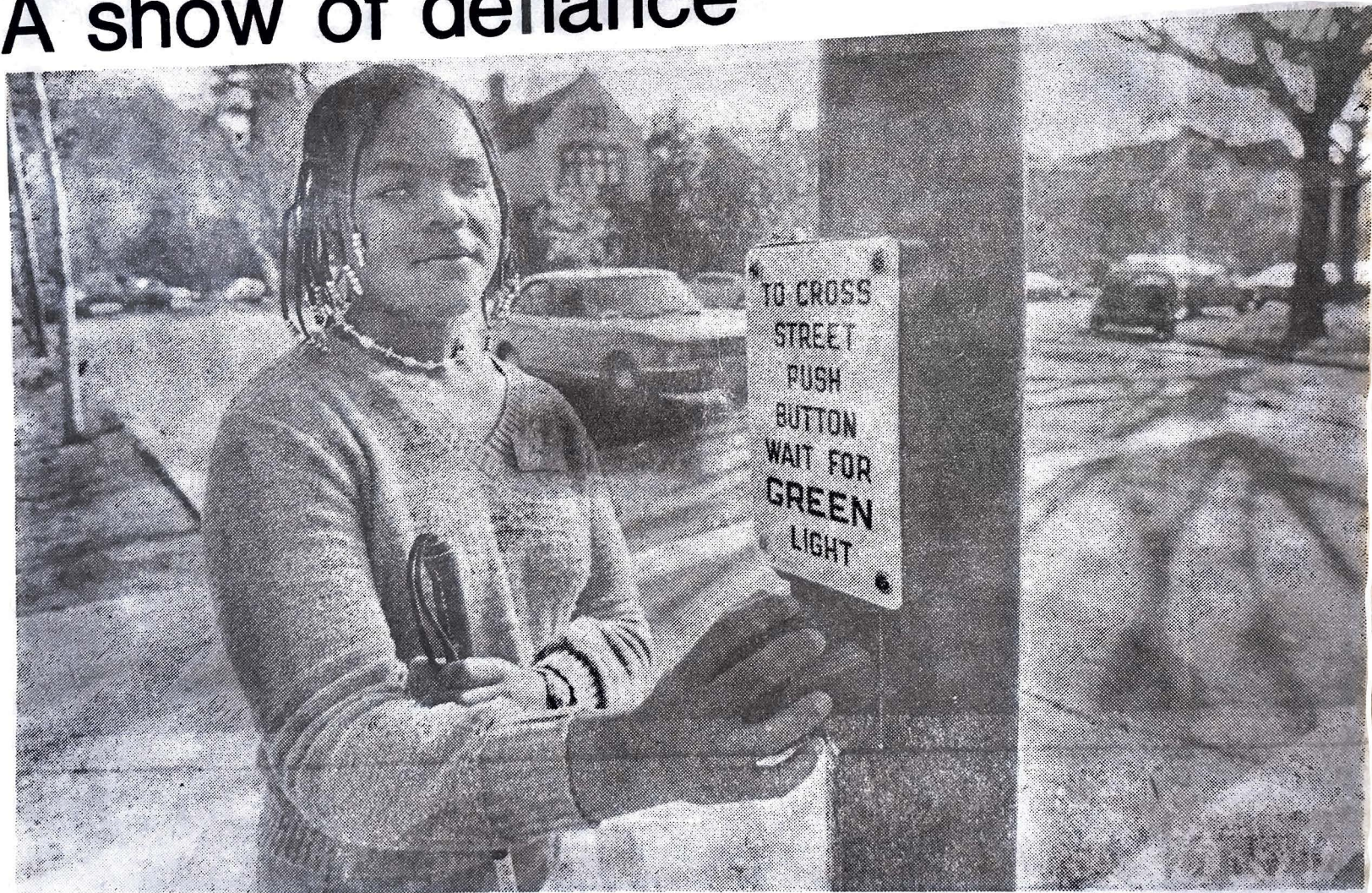


A show of defiance



Examiner/Judith Calson Rausch

A blind student demonstrates her familiarity with the neighborhood in which her Berkeley school is presently located

Blind, deaf students protest relocation

By Mireya Navarro

With the nearly completed, \$50 million facilities in Fremont scheduled to open in September, opponents of the relocation of the California schools for the blind and for the deaf in Berkeley are adamant.

In a rally yesterday called by the Employees' Council of the California School for the Blind, a group of staffers, parents, students and supporters spoke against leaving the schools' 112-year-old Berkeley home for "a cauliflower field."

"If it moves, I'm not going (to the school); if it stays I'll go," said 11-year-old John Spence, a student at the school since September.

"One reason I don't want to go out there is that we won't be able to go to Derby Food (a grocery store) or anywhere," he added.

Minutes later, Spence demonstrated what he meant. Walking without more assistance than his cane, Spence went down the steps of the school at 3001 Derby St. and headed toward the sidewalk that would take him to the store two blocks down the street.

Employees' Council members argued such independent travel will not be possible at the new site. And the demonstration was moved awhile later to Walnut Avenue and Chevey Lane in Fremont, where Spence stumbled along the rough-surfaced road in field lands of the semi-rural area where the schools are to be located.

According to Leo Bailey, instructor in orientation and mobility at the school, sidewalks, city blocks, grid-patterned streets, safe intersections and easy access to public

transportation and stores are resources needed for his teaching. They are missing in the relocation area of Fremont.

"Our basic problem is the lack of resources," Bailey said. Parents, teachers and students alike expressed their complaints: mud-lined streets with no walks, dangerous crossings with no traffic controls, a half-mile distance between the site and the nearest shopping center and a one-mile walk to the closest bus stop. They described the site as "isolated" and called the environment "restrictive."

"I absolutely refuse to come out here," said Aletha Hall, 16, a four-year student at the school. "The school itself is really nice, but the location is not like we can go out and be with the public."

The new school for the blind will occupy 20 acres — about 11 more than the 50-acre location they share with the school for the deaf in Berkeley with 71 acres going to the school for the deaf.

The superintendent of the school for the deaf, Dr. Henry Koppling, said he could not speak for all 300 of his school's staff, some of whom participated in yesterday's rally. But, he said, "the spirit and mood in this school is supportive of the move to Fremont." The school has 518 students.

Koppling said "we're sad to leave Berkeley" but called his school's new facility "the best possible." Staff members of the blind school called it "superior" but not the best.

"It's flat. You don't get the information that a variety of surface textures, inclines, declines and stairs give," said Bailey, explaining these are needed by the blind for orientation. Yesterday, Berkeley was acclaimed as a major cultural center

that provides all the resources, support and medical services needed for the school's students to attain self-sufficiency.

"Two percent of the people in Berkeley are handicapped, so we have a very sympathetic community," said John Paul, mobility instructor.

The relocation of the schools was mandated in 1973, when the Legislature passed a bill appropriating funds for a new site. The decision was based on reports that the schools were situated on a trace of an active earthquake fault. However, a 1978 geological study by the University of California — which is interested in acquiring the site — contends that the fault is inactive, which makes the location acceptable for the school under safety laws and that there is no evidence that its spurs run beneath the main buildings.

"We don't agree to that," said Victor Biondi, assistant to state schools chief Wilson Riles. He said the contention is "the word of two geologists of UC" and that stronger evidence is needed to determine the absolute safety of the place.

Biondi said the position of the state Department of Education is that the relocation is warranted. He said it is up to the Legislature to prevent the move.

Renovating the Berkeley facilities would cost \$30 million, he estimated.

Judy Peletz, of the Employee's Council, said several parents are considering bringing legal action under Public Law 94-142, which mandates that handicapped children be educated in "the least restrictive environment."

All but about eight of the 115 blind students reside in the school. Their ages range from 4 to 21.