

# Barrier-free Living

*A friend's tragedy leads three alumni to remove housing obstacles for the disabled*

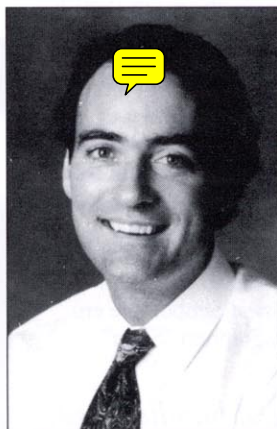
**by Kevin Brooks '89**

**A**MONG THE HUNDREDS OF BOUND VOLUMES of honors projects in Macalester's DeWitt Wallace Library, one continues to carry a special meaning for Stephen Wiggins, Charles Berg and Stephen Vander Schaaf, all 1978 graduates.

In 1975, Wiggins' best childhood friend, Mike "Hondo" Pesch, broke his neck after diving into a drought-shallow lake in northern Minnesota. As a result, Pesch was paralyzed for the rest of his life. Wiggins left Macalester for a semester to look after his friend. He spent three weeks with Pesch at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester, Minn., and later worked as a resident assistant when Pesch moved to Courage Center, a transitional rehabilitation facility in the Twin Cities.

"I talked whenever he was interested in talking," Wiggins recalled, "and I would try to get him out of the hospital for a few hours whenever his rehabilitation regimen was open."

At Courage Center, Wiggins began to see how Pesch and other young residents with impaired mobility — many of whom had been active and athletic before their accidents — wanted an



**Stephen Wiggins**

therapy and day activities, but where do you live?" said Wiggins.

Back at Macalester, roommates Wiggins and Berg wondered about a residential solution for young people with physical disabilities. Starting from an original idea by Pesch and other Courage Center residents, the two planned what became known as "The Project," an honors project encouraged by faculty advisers Chuck Green and David Lanegran '63.

"The Project" was a proposed organizational structure for a network of affordable, resident-managed homes that would meet the needs of people with spinal cord

injuries or mobility impairments. For funding, Wiggins and Berg turned to a rental assistance loan program at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. They also enlisted the aid of a Twin Cities neurologist, Lawrence Schut, who helped them secure financial backing from a consortium of Minnesota health care companies.

"The Project," inspired by Pesch, became the blueprint for Accessible Space



**Charles Berg**



**Stephen Vander Schaaf**

Inc., a nonprofit organization incorporated a few weeks before Wiggins and Berg graduated from Macalester — with honors. Three months later, the two received a \$1.1 million grant from HUD to build five “barrier-free” houses in the Twin Cities.

Wiggins downplays his role in founding ASI. “Mike Pesch came up with the idea of Accessible Space. Chuck and I were simply the people who executed on that concept,” he says.

**W**HEN BERG LEFT THE TWIN CITIES to attend Georgetown University Law School, Wiggins steered the organization through a rough year in 1980 as ASI’s first executive director. He had to deal with a series of disasters, including a tornado which struck one site, flooding that demolished the first floor of ASI’s management headquarters and a violent break-in at a third site. “The old maxim that ‘everything that can go wrong, will go wrong’ couldn’t have been more appropriate,” said Wiggins.

In 1982, Wiggins decided to pursue an M.B.A. at Harvard Business School. He encouraged his roommate, Stephen “Shep”

*‘If you were young and handicapped, your choices were to live at home with your parents, or at a nursing home. There were always different places for physical therapy and day activities, but where do you live?’*

— Stephen Wiggins

Vander Schaaf, to interview for the executive director position at ASI. Vander Schaaf, an old friend from Austin, said there was one small problem. He didn’t have a suit. Undaunted, Wiggins loaned him his suit. It was an awkward fit at best, but the shoes — and the job — were a perfect match.

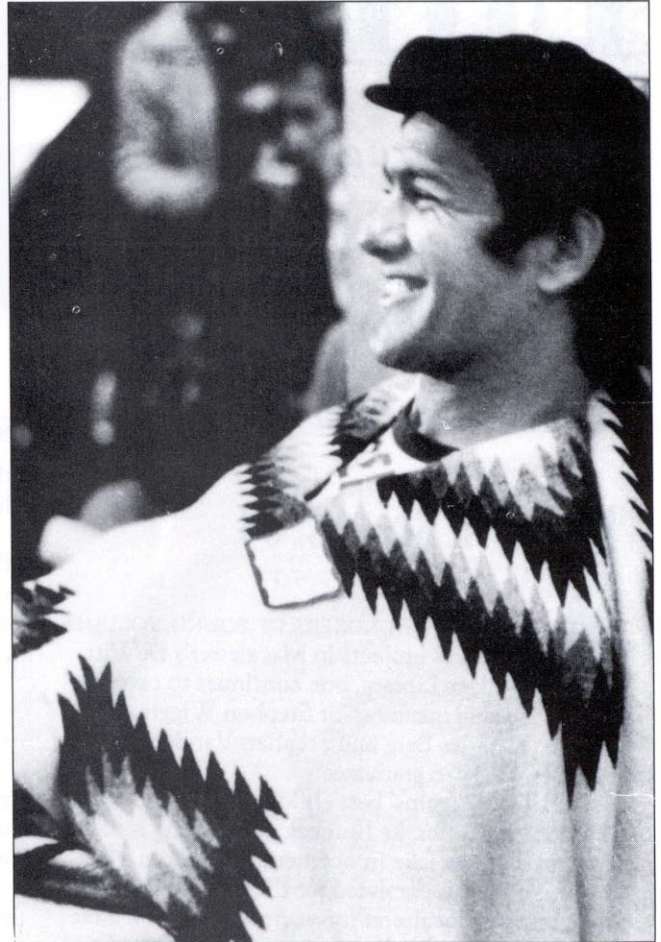
“It ended up being a natural fit, with ASI’s philosophy of resident management and self-reliance,” said Vander Schaaf, who had been instrumental in setting up community block clubs on St. Paul’s East Side.

Under Vander Schaaf’s leadership, ASI grew rapidly. Today, the ASI network includes 32 homes and apartment buildings in four states, and it is recognized nationally as a model for resident-managed care. “One of the biggest advantages, besides the fact that it saves the state money and provides housing, is that it gives many people with a disability a chance to give something back by sharing their care with others in a more efficient system,” says Vander Schaaf.

“Steve Vander Schaaf deserves all the credit for building ASI into the substantial organization it

has become,” says Wiggins, who has since moved on to other projects. After a brief stint in a Wall Street investment firm, he founded Oxford Health Plans Inc. in 1984. Oxford, which operates in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, has become one of the fastest-growing health maintenance organizations in the country. The company has annual revenues in excess of \$500 million, employs 750 and is the region’s largest health care provider to the poor.

Last year, Wiggins and Berg again joined forces to start Health Partners Inc., a company providing capital and management services to medical groups.



**Mike Pesch: The ASI home across the street from Courage Center carries his name.**

“I’m bringing skills I developed in the corporate investment and acquisition area,” Berg says, “and Steve obviously has a lot of experience in the health care industry. We still have a great time working together.”

ASI continues to hold a special place in the hearts of Wiggins and Berg, both of whom serve on its board of directors, as well as Vander Schaaf. The organization, pivotal for each of their careers, honors the spirit of a good friend while setting new standards for accessible, affordable housing with supportive care services.

Mike Pesch died Jan. 6, 1992, a year before the opening of the ASI home that carries his name. Pesch Place, located across the street from Courage Center, is a lasting tribute to his memory. ●