ACCESSIBLE SPACE, INC.

The first five years:
1980 - 1985

From concept to reality.
LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER

Ten years ago, Accessible Space, Inc. was conceived by a handful of residents and staff members at the Courage Center. I hope that a reminder of ASI's history can be used as a checkpoint for the organization as it moves forward and broadens the scope of its mission.

I first became aware of the needs of mobility impaired adults through my close friend, Mike Pesch (Hondo). Hondo and I were high school classmates in Austin, Minnesota. We were basketball teammates and spent most of our adolescence as best friends. In 1975, he was paralyzed from a diving accident and began his long struggle with quadriplegia.

A few months after his accident, I took time off from Macalaster College to stay with Hondo in Rochester, where he was in the rehabilitation program at St. Mary's Hospital. There, another high school classmate, Tim Fleming, was also involved in the rehabilitation program.

For both Hondo and Tim, the best stepping stone from St. Mary's was the Courage Center. Neither of them looked at the Courage Center as a long-term alternative, but a place to begin the long process of emotional acceptance and physical rehabilitation.

Both were eventually accepted at Courage Center and, soon after, I was hired as a personal care attendant. As a new, refreshing alternative to traditional care settings, Courage Center was enjoying the exhilaration of a start-up residential care program. We were some of the first residents and staff at the Center and the newness naturally evoked our own creative thinking.

It was at the Courage Center that the concept of ASI began to take shape and be visualized. There was an obvious need. For most of the people I knew at the Courage Center, few alternatives to institutionalized settings existed.

Many people influenced the underlying concepts of ASI: Maynard Bostrom, Mike Pesch, Mike Darling, and an assortment of others. The original concept was quite straightforward. It contained three primary elements:

- A residential, home-like environment where mobility impaired adults could live.
- Shared personal care and homemaker services.
- Resident control over the day-to-day matters of managing a cooperative group setting.

The "project", as we came to call it, was first documented in a college paper I wrote with Chuck Berg for a Public Policy course at Macalaster. Chuck was my college roommate and eventually became my partner in the early stages of developing ASI. In our paper, we laid out the conceptual framework and proposed an action strategy to develop a network of five residential settings.
From this early conceptual stage to the reality of an operating company took three years. The basic dilemma we faced was that many handicapped people also happen to be low income and therefore dependent on public support.

Our strategy was to break-up ASI’s funding needs into its component parts. Health care services would be funded through Title XIX (state) funding. Homemaker and other support services would be funded through Title XX (counties). Funding for the physical facilities and subsidization of the annual rents for the low-income residents would come through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (Federal).

Obviously, building or renovating the actual buildings was the first step. Naively, we expected the other funding (Title XIX and Title XX) would eventually fall into place if we could get money to construct the buildings. We started out by approaching the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In our first meeting, the HUD told us that they funded large organizations with substance and credibility, not “motivated individuals”. Fortunately for us, in that first meeting was a gentleman named Greg Theissen who would become a key supporter for us at HUD.

Greg thought the idea was sound but said we needed clout, substance, and most importantly, credibility. Well, Chuck and I weren’t exactly the image of respectability as college sophomores.

In the usual good fortune of ASI, we were introduced to Larry Schut, M.D., a well-regarded neurologist whose family history with ataxia had lead him to establish Hereditary and Acquired Neurological Disorders, Inc. Dr. Schut proved to be a missing ingredient in making the project a success. In long meetings with Dr. Schut, we decided to form a consortium of founding organizations who would loan ASI money to get started (which we paid back 100%) and most importantly provide credibility through association. Those organizations included the Courage Center, Health Central Incorporated, Hereditary and Acquired Neurological Disorders, Inc. and the Greater Minneapolis Metropolitan Housing Corporation. Through months and months of meetings and Board of Director debates, these organizations agreed to provide “seed-money” loans which we would repay from the proceeds of a government loan we hoped to obtain.

The most important affiliation for ASI at the time was Health Central, Inc., a large corporation that owned and managed hospitals. But, it was not the size of the company or the business they were in that made them of particular value to ASI; it was because with their affiliation came one of our most important founding board members — Jim Rice. Jim has superior organization abilities and an eye for the “critical path”. I had never met anyone more skillful at moving a group of people towards a consensus opinion. Jim helped us formalize our plans and provided managerial stewardship as we began our work. Without Jim Rice and Larry Schut, ASI would not exist.
After many more months, we finally assembled an application with credibility borrowed from our new "consortium" of sponsoring organizations. We submitted the funding application to the Department of Housing and Urban Development in April of 1978. In August, a call came for Congressman Don Frazier's office alerting us to the award. It included a fund reservation of $1 million to finance the design and construction of five homes and included rent subsidies for twenty years to pay the mortgage.

It took from August, 1978 until September of 1980 before we walked through the doors of a completed ASI home. Many trade-offs and concessions had to be made as we struggled to maximize the quality of each building within the very limited funding available through HUD.

Easily the most enjoyable part of developing the buildings was the architectural design. John Salmon, the architect who designed ASI’s buildings, came up with many unique and creative ways of solving the issues of accessibility. He was so successful in the design of ASI that he was soon after appointed to be the Director of Barrier-Free Design for the Federal government.

The designs were finalized one afternoon at the Courage Center when Maynard Bostrom, Mike Pesch, Chuck Berg and myself locked ourselves in the Courage Center gymnasium with the three sets of drawings from which we would pick a final design. We used masking tape to map-out the floor plans on the gymnasium floor. Those of us who weren’t already in a wheelchair got in one and we wheeled around our imaginary home. It proved to be a very valuable exercise and one that significantly shaped the eventual design of the buildings. After four hours and two six-packs, we emerged from the gymnasium confident that we had found solutions to the important design issues.

During the first year of operation the old maxim that “everything that can go wrong, will go wrong” couldn’t have been more appropriate. A tornado struck the 28th Street site causing substantial damage. A flood demolished the ground floor of the Chicago site where all of the management files were kept. Most tragically, a violent break-in occurred at the Iglike site. We were also threatened that first year with the loss of our personal care attendant funding. Fortunately, we survived all these tragedies and emerged after our first battle-weary year as a much stronger organization with the determination to be a long-term success.

I am extremely honored to have been a part of the founding of ASI. It was clear proof that if you believe strongly enough in an idea and can involve others in that vision, anything is possible. Thank you very much for the opportunity to reflect on ASI. It is a heartwarming memory that will always be very special to me.

Stephen F. Wiggins

"ASI has maintained its resident perspective and unshakeable belief in the abilities every individual possesses."
— ASI Executive Director

John Norenberg and Cheryl Springers