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Curb ramps liberate Americans with disabilities - and everyone else

By Frank Greve

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WASHINGTON - The barricades that quadriplegic Ed Roberts and his comrades stormed 40 years ago were a few inches high. Yet today millions of Americans pass daily through the breaches they created.

Curb cuts, the breaches are called. Or curb ramps.

Since 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act has required them on new construction, renovations and wherever a city does major street or sidewalk work. All this curb-ramp building has helped the United States lead the world when it comes to providing public access for people with disabilities.

"For all this country's many faults, one thing we do better than anybody is architectural-barrier removal," said Mary Lou Breslin, the co-founder and senior policy adviser of the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, based in Berkeley, Calif. By her estimate, more than 60 countries are trying to catch up.

Curb ramps also are a boon for bicyclists, stroller-pushers, skateboarders and in-line skaters. They're a help, too, for travelers with wheeled luggage and delivery truckers with hand carts.

In fact, 9 out of 10 unencumbered pedestrians will veer off course to take advantage of a curb ramp, according to Jim Terry, an architect specializing in accessible design who studied pedestrian behavior at a shopping mall in Sarasota, Fla.

Roberts, a quadriplegic due to polio who needed help breathing, had none of this in mind when he enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1962, the school's first wheelchair-using quadriplegic. His dorm - and that of a dozen other students with severe disabilities who joined him over the next few years - was Cowell Hospital, high on a hill on the eastern end of the campus.

"I had to plan my classes so that each was downhill from the former one," recalled Michael Pachovas, who got around the Berkeley campus in an ineffectual powered wheelchair called a Motorette. "At the end of the day, I'd hitch rides with people or ask them to push me back uphill."

Roberts and his cadre were determined to escape Cowell Hospital and live off campus.

"They were adults, living in a hospital with nursing charts and dating patterns being recorded (visitors, in other words), and it was no way to live," recalled activist Ken Stein, who's now a program administrator for the Mayor's Office on Disability in San Francisco.

Roberts, by then a graduate student, was the first to escape - and to find himself confronting obstacles to independence at every street corner. Unassisted wheelchair users in those days would wheel to driveways at alleys or loading docks, then roll along in the street to the next driveway that tended in the right direction. It was slow, it wasn't always possible and it was often dangerous.

An ally of Roberts, Hale Zukas, persuaded the city of Berkeley's public works department in 1969-70 to create some cement curb ramps at intersections on Telegraph Avenue just south of the campus. Although two Illinois campuses had poured some curb ramps in the `50s, Berkeley's are thought to be the first built by a city government to promote

independent living for people in wheelchairs.

Within a year, Roberts and Berkeley's other students with disabilities - by then politically charged enough to call themselves the Rolling Quads - were demanding curb ramps faster than the city's permitting procedure could provide them.

"We had a Wednesday-night poker game in those days, and a lot of good ideas came up over those games," recalled Pachovas, now 58, a lifelong political activist and sometime real estate agent. "One night, we decided to put in some curb ramps on our own after the game. A couple of our attendants did construction work, so they had access to cement, and I had a wheelbarrow."

They set out sometime after midnight. "We didn't cut curbs; we just added skirts to existing curbs," Pachovas said. "The police threatened to arrest us, but they didn't."

The early results were crude. "You needed a running start to get up them, and going down, you could end up on your head in the street," Breslin said.

It didn't take long, however, to see how much the ramps enhanced mobility.

Curb ramps are crucial to independence for people who use wheelchairs, according to architect Bill Hecker of Hecker Design Ltd. in Birmingham, Ala., a specialist in access for people with disabilities.

Most wheelchair users rely on public transportation and need to cross several streets between their homes and the nearest mass-transit stop, he said.

"If you take out the curb ramp, which is the key link between the two, you've taken a huge, huge chunk out of accessibility," he said.

The breakthrough for the national independent-living movement was the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. It gave people with disabilities the civil rights protections that had been conferred on minorities.

That was a giant shift, Breslin said, away from the be-resourceful, kindness-of-strangers approach by which people with disabilities always had lived. "It was a shift from `If I can't get up the stairs to class it's my problem' to `It's not my problem.'"

No one knows how many curb ramps are in use today. Terry's best guess is tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands.

It's similarly unclear how much they've cost. The simplest single curb ramp runs about $900, according to Hecker. As a rule, cities put them in when it's convenient or when the Justice Department persuades them that they must.

Among the most accessible cities, disabled-rights activists say, are Portland, Ore.; Sacramento, Calif.; Chicago; Kansas City, Mo.; and, of course, Berkeley, where Roberts died in 1995 at the age of 55.

The chair that he took his curbs in is now in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington. Outside the museum, all the corners are ramped, enabling what Breslin described as "the seamless inclusion of people with disabilities into the mainstream."

For more on the Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement, go to http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/drilm

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DESIGN

Because they're useful to so many people for so many reasons, curb ramps are exhibit A in the so-called "universal design" movement, which is very big in architecture and design schools.

Curb ramps richly fulfill the movement's credo that a good design "increases access, safety and convenience for everyone," as Edward Steinfeld, an architecture professor at the University of Buffalo, puts it.

Good universal design also calls for elevators with floor-number buttons low enough for anyone to reach. Also doors that open with levers instead of knobs.

What drives universal designers nuts? One thing is knives whose shapes don't tell the user which side of the blade does the cutting. Another is the inability of automakers to agree on which side of their vehicles the gas caps belong.

For more on universal design, go to www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea
