

Breaking Down Barriers

Brian McLane is committed to creating better lives for people with disabilities

By Kathryn Smith

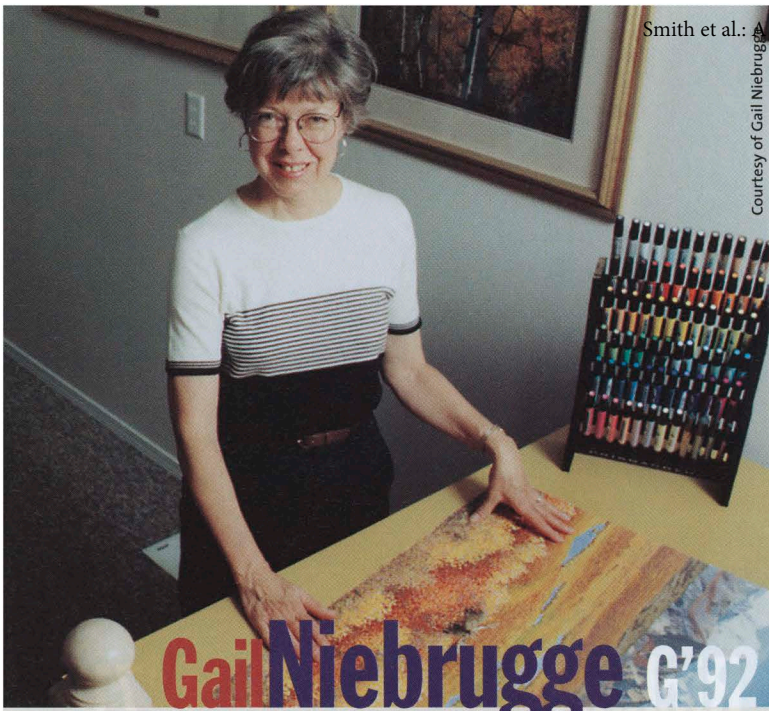
Brian McLane grew up in an era when America's leaders challenged citizens to seek ways to improve society. As a young man with cerebral palsy, he resolved to not let his disability define him or overshadow his skills. Since then, he has fought to improve access to education, work, and leisure opportunities for people with disabilities, while at the same time working in several professional fields, coaching basketball, managing rock bands and political campaigns, and running for political office himself. He is currently assistant commissioner of the Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID) in the New York State Education Department.

McLane's accomplishments haven't gone unnoticed. Last November he was one of five people inducted into the National Hall of Fame for Persons with Disabilities, joining such previous inductees as Helen Keller, former President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Gallaudet University President I. King Jordan. During his induction speech, McLane spoke of how the social changes of the '60s influenced his life. He also credited his family for his success. "My parents believed that anyone with a vision to make things better could make that vision a reality if they had the courage and perseverance to see it through," McLane says. "They wanted to create a better life for their son and for other children with disabilities. They refused to accept what was, and worked toward what could be. They prepared me for a life of work and service."

McLane, who joined the state education department in 1989, works at VESID to expand educational and career opportunities for people with disabilities. "The disabled child becomes the disabled adult," he says. "We can't raise a child to be dependent on a parent all his life. At VESID we believe education has everything to do with a child's success and independence in adulthood. But for people with disabilities, this has not been the way education has gone."

He grew up in Syracuse and attended Percy Hughes School for children with disabilities from 3rd grade through 10th grade. After his father waged a successful battle against the Westhill Central School District for segregating students with disabilities, McLane enrolled there, completed his high school coursework, and was the first student in a wheelchair to graduate from Westhill. "I was born into the right family," McLane says.

He entered SU as a freshman in 1964 and was again a pioneer—arriving at a time when few campus buildings were accessible to him. The University limited him to nine credits per semester. Friends volunteered to help him get around campus. McLane, who had begun working as a statistician for the SU men's basketball team during his final year of high school, also



Gail Niebrugge G'92

Alaska in Bloom

Landscape artist Gail Niebrugge loves to paint in vivid color. So when friends asked her to spend the summer of 1976 with them in the Alaskan wilderness, she was more than happy to leave the monochromatic palette of her native Southern California behind. "My whole family fell in love with Alaska's magnificent beauty," Niebrugge says. "When August came we decided to stay and see what winter was like."

Niebrugge soon discovered that Alaska's winters can be extremely difficult, with few comforts and sub-zero temperatures. But isolation from the art world helped her develop a unique artistic style. "My work has authenticity because I had an opportunity to study the delicate balance of nature," she says. "I found my life's work painting Alaska's wilderness."

Niebrugge hiked many miles in search of subjects to paint and learned to fly a plane so she could explore Alaska's wide vistas from the air. But in 1986—confined to bed with limited arm movement following surgery—she began experimenting with pointillism, a technique that uses thousands of small dots of color to create images, and shifted her focus from majestic landscapes to the captivating beauty of Alaska's wildflowers. "So far I've completed in-depth studies of 26 varieties of Alaskan wildflowers," she says. "They've become my passion."

During her recovery from surgery, Niebrugge feared she'd be unable to continue earning a living as a painter. Considering teaching as an alternative, she enrolled in SU's Independent Study Degree Program, completing a master's degree in art illustration in 1992. "The illustration program taught me other ways to use my art," Niebrugge says. Since then, she's completed public commissions, designed holiday cards for the National Diabetes Association, and illustrated two books. She also created her own book, *Gail Niebrugge's Alaska Wildflowers: An Artist's Journey in Painting and Prose* (Epicenter Press).

After 19 years in the wilderness, Niebrugge now lives closer to civilization in Palmer, Alaska, which boasts its very own hair stylist and 24-hour grocery store. "Looking back, the long winters in the bush were a blessing," she says. "If the wildflowers bloomed all year, I'd be out searching for subjects to paint and never get any work done in my studio." —Christine Yackel



Stephen D. Cannarilli/The Syracuse Newspapers

Brian McLane '69

received assistance from the basketball players, who carried him up and down stairs throughout his five years on campus.

In addition to serving as a basketball team statistician, McLane was a member of the Newman Club for Catholic students and Alpha Phi Omega (APO) service fraternity. A television and radio major, he worked at WAER radio and the *Daily Orange*. He also supported himself by managing five different rock bands.

As vice president of APO during his senior year, McLane and his fraternity brothers worked with SU to reduce campus architectural barriers to people with disabilities. Their example led the APO nation-

al leadership to adopt the fraternity's first national service project in 1970—eliminating architectural barriers on all campuses with APO chapters.

From there he fought to improve disabled access to many public places in Central New York, including the MONY Plaza in Syracuse and the Syracuse airport, and was involved in discussions with the city to develop policies related to accessible parking spaces. "This was trend-setting at the time," he says. His efforts earned him the nickname "Mr. Ramp."

After graduating from SU, McLane worked for WSYR-TV, and then earned a master's degree in sports administration from Ohio University in 1971. He became the first full-time director of parks and recreation for the town of Cicero, New York, in 1972, and served as public relations director for the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce from 1976 to 1977.

Around this time, he developed an interest in politics. He volunteered for numerous political campaigns and ran as a Democrat for Onondaga County clerk in 1977. Although he lost to a longtime incumbent, he became an active player in Onondaga County Democratic politics. "The thrill of competition along with a desire to influence public policy compelled me to run," he says. "We didn't win the election, but it did raise my political profile."

In 1978 McLane became senior executive assistant to state Assemblyman Mel Zimmer, who sponsored legislation on curb cuts before such federal legislation existed. "The activities of my generation led to the concept of universal design," he says. "This is now incorporated into many state and federal laws."

In 1983 McLane returned to the world of sports and recreation when he was appointed assistant commissioner for governmental and community affairs in the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. To this day, he maintains a strong interest in sports and remains a loyal SU basketball fan.

Over the years, McLane has also volunteered with numerous initiatives to influence policy relating to individuals with disabilities, including the 1977 White House Conference on the Disabled, and the Governor's Task Force on Accessibility for the 1980 Winter Olympic Games. He chaired the New York State Council of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities and the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, and served on

many other government and private councils.

McLane, who recently had an SU scholarship established in his name by an anonymous donor, considered these efforts an avocation rather than a vocation until state officials—including former Governor Mario Cuomo—convinced him to accept the position with VESID. "My life is not a master plan, it just sort of happens," he says. "At one point I promised I would not make my disability my career. But as I got older and wiser, I came to understand that my disability is a part of me and that there is a need for individuals with disabilities to serve as spokespeople."

One From the Heart

Aminister, under the care of cardiologist P. Renee Brown Obi, once told his wife: “God didn’t make any perfect people, but he came close when he made Dr. Renee.”

For Brown Obi, the compliment is a tribute to her dedication to tending to the physical and emotional needs of patients. “Talking to patients is like teaching in the classroom,” she says. “You can’t assume people know more than they do. Communication must be basic until the patient is educated enough to move to the next level of understanding. Good medicine and good communication work hand-in-hand to achieve a positive effect.”

Brown Obi decided to specialize in cardiology because she wanted to help and heal patients. After graduating from SU, she earned a medical degree from Temple University and served fellowships at the Medical College of Pennsylvania and the Episcopal Heart Institute of Temple University. “Diseases of the heart frequently can be addressed to improve the health and lives of patients at a much higher rate than with other more debilitating diseases,” she says. “When patients and doctors work together, treatment plans accelerate the return to health. It’s important to remove the mysteries of the disease process.”

Advice that is easily understood and readily accessible is a hallmark of how Brown Obi educates her patients at First Care Medical Center in Jackson, Tennessee, which she operates with her husband, Emmanuel Obi, an internist. This isn’t the first time the Nashville native has worked with a family member. Before



Robert Mullenburg

Dr. P. Renee Brown Obi '80

joining her husband in business, Brown Obi worked for nine years with her father, who is also a cardiologist.

During her days at SU, Brown Obi recalls how her parents’ guidance helped her develop personal and professional goals. “Dad always joked with me,” she says. “When I expressed an interest in studying drama or becoming a writer, he would laugh and say: ‘That’s fine—as long as it’s after you become a doctor.’”

Brown Obi is pleased with how she’s been able to balance her private life, with her husband and 3-year-old son Olise, and her medical career. “My family instilled an ethic in me to never give up,” she says. “And that has carried me through life.” —**Joanne Arany**



Courtesy of Leona Buccì

Leona Buccì G'87

On Their Own Terms

Leona Buccì believes it’s time to talk openly about something most of us don’t like to think about: dying. As executive director of Hospice of Gaston County in Gastonia, North Carolina, she helps people die on their own terms—having their voices heard and deciding for themselves what the end of life should be. “Most people want to die at home with their loved ones, but the reality is, most die in a hospital or institution,” says Buccì, who received a graduate degree in nursing from SU.

Perceiving her community’s need to address end-of-life issues, Buccì established the End of Life Coalition in Gastonia, a suburb of Charlotte. She invited 23 carefully selected community represen-

tatives—including the mayor, United Way administrators, key area ministers, and representatives from the Department of Family Health Services—to sit on a regional committee and begin a process of education to improve end-of-life care in the county. Buccì has since been honored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as a leader of end-of-life care in the United States, and was one of 300 participants invited to the foundation’s January seminar in Newport Beach, California.

“We’re growing,” she says of the coalition, which recently hosted two well-attended events for physicians and the community. “We have developed a curriculum to encourage other communities to improve end-of-life care—to help people talk about their vision, and to design a process for activating a living will.”

—**Amy Shires**

Trash Into Cash

When Lisa Heller jumped into a dumpster on campus to search for a lost ring, she had no idea of the treasure she was about to uncover. In the end-of-semester rush of clearing out residence halls, students had left behind more than just old term papers and empty pizza boxes. Mixed in with the garbage, Heller found everything from canned and packaged food items, clothing, and furniture, to a cigar box full of what turned out to be rare and valuable postage stamps. "I started inventing scenarios for how this could happen," says Heller, who teaches rhetoric and coaches the debate team at Bates College in Maine, and will pursue a doctorate at the University of Pittsburgh this fall. "I thought it must have been a mistake that these things were left for trash."

But Heller realized it wasn't a mistake—that, in fact, it happens at college campuses across the country every spring. "Our culture is so wasteful," she says. "Although the idea of recycling gets a lot of attention, it's the least effective way of dealing with our wastefulness. We need to look for more ways to reduce and reuse."

After completing a master's degree in speech communication from the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Heller took a job at the University of Richmond in Virginia. It was there that she began looking for ways to reduce campus waste. She still wasn't thinking big, but—as someone with an interest in environmental studies and envi-



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Lisa Heller '95

ronmental communications—she wanted to at least make a small difference. She began that spring by filling her Honda Civic with as many discarded goods as she could and bringing them home for a yard sale. Her efforts grew each year, finally resulting in Dump and Run—a business that works to turn campus "trash into cash" for nonprofit organizations. Proceeds from sales benefit a charity or cause selected by volunteers, and also go back into operating costs.

Throughout the year, Heller spends about 15 hours a week running the company. Dump and Run (*dumpandrun.org*) worked with 8 to 10 schools this past spring, and is reviewing inquiries from more than 50 other schools—including SU—for next year. "When we come to Syracuse, I'm hoping some generous corporate sponsor will lend us, say, an airplane hangar," she says.

—Amy Shires



Joe Lawton

Charmane Wong '84

For Children's Sake

Charmane Wong understands how important it is for children to get a good start in life. And as director of administration for the nine early childhood education programs at Graham-Windham Services to Families and Children in New York City, she's doing all she can to ensure they do. "The best part of the job for me is seeing children and staff involved in the learning process, and staff working with parents to extend that learning beyond the classroom," she says. "When I go into the classroom, I am enriched by the variety of learning experiences we offer that are relevant to the development of a healthy child."

The seeds of Wong's interest in working with children and families were planted at SU, where she enrolled in a special interdisciplinary program that allowed her to choose concentrations in social work and early childhood education. She received a bachelor's degree in speech communication from the College of Visual and Performing Arts, and later earned a law degree at West Virginia University. After law school she practiced with Bronx Legal Services and directed the Youth Advocacy Project.

Wong joined Graham-Windham in 1995 as director of Harlem Initiatives, a division that focuses on anti-eviction cases and helping women make the transition from welfare to work. Since the program began, she has helped 25 women leave public assistance. "Trying to move from welfare to work in an early childhood setting is challenging and demanding," Wong says. "These women have shown tremendous strength in successfully making the transition. Children in their care have learned much about self-esteem and building on individual strength." —Kelly Homan Rodoski