

Giving Love a Lift

Discovering one of the hidden benefits of accessible transportation. It happened in Massachusetts.

By Richard J. Margolis

At first, John Winske recalls, it did not seem like "some enchanted evening"—just a routine reception at the annual conference of the Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities. The meeting, as it happened, was taking place on John's old turf at the Massachusetts Hospital School in Canton. He had attended junior high there in the mid-1970s.

But nostalgia was not on John's agenda that particular night in June 1986. Politics was. A candidate for president of the coalition, John worked the crowd, steering his wheelchair from group to group, shaking lots of hands.

Suddenly, across the crowded room, "I saw this really beautiful woman. I couldn't stop staring. Where had I seen her before?"

John made his way to where the woman was sitting; he squinted at her name tag. "That's when I just flipped out," he says. "The young lady was Joy Bevan, whom I'd gone to school with right there in Canton. After graduation we had completely lost touch."

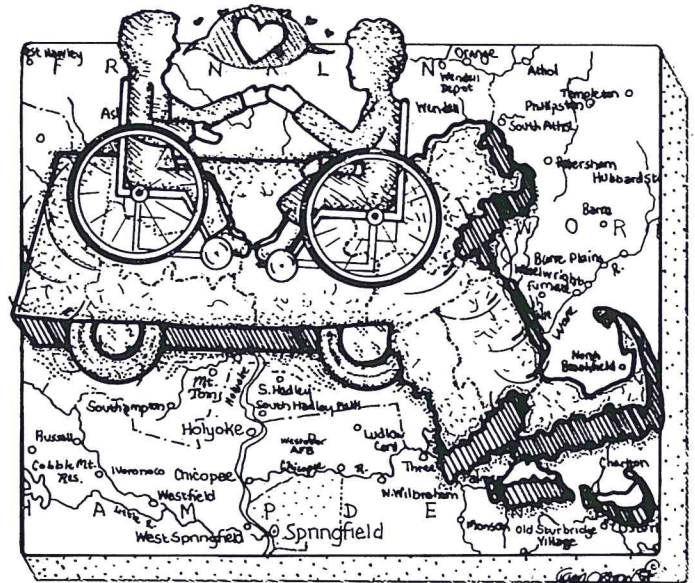
Joy didn't recognize John right away—his name tag was hidden beneath a lapel. But when he spoke his name, she gave him a warm smile.

So after a decade of separation, the two seemed delighted to resume their friendship. But there were problems. John lived in Boston and Joy in Fitchburg, 40 miles away. Neither owned a car; neither could afford the \$150 it cost to hire a special van for wheelchair users. How were they to rendezvous?

"Love goes toward love as schoolboys from their books," Shakespeare's Romeo had informed an attentive Juliet. John found something more practical to say to Joy. "I told her about the new bus program," he says. "There was a bus available between Fitchburg and Boston that had a chairlift." The round-trip fare was \$9.

The coalition had lobbied long and hard for intercity buses equipped with such lifts. Now, three days after their chance meeting, Joy boarded one that carried her to John.

It might have been called a fickle "lift of love." During that first trip, Joy remembers, "everything went fine until I got to Boston. Then the lift got stuck. That happened quite



a few more times—until they finally redesigned the whole thing."

Pretty soon friendship ripened into courtship, and Joy was taking the bus to Boston nearly every weekend. Stuck lifts were not the only hazard she faced. There was also the problem of getting from the depot to John's apartment, about a mile down the road.

In the beginning Joy could not use Boston's transportation services for handicapped individuals because she was from out of town. So she rode her electric wheelchair through downtown traffic in the dark of night. Winter, she says, was "very difficult—I kept slipping on the ice and snow."

Later Massachusetts relaxed its regulation, enabling all handicapped state residents to use intercity bus service (see the accompanying article by Pamela Lebeaux and Michael Sharff).

Today, however, Joy and John no longer have to rely on intercity rendezvous. Joy now has a job with the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission in Boston. And John—after serving as president of the coalition—has been appointed executive director. Last month they announced their engagement; the wedding is slated for June 18 in Fitchburg.

"We're inviting all our friends," Joy says. "We may have 250 people at the wedding." Some, no doubt, will be carried there by the lift of love.



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