

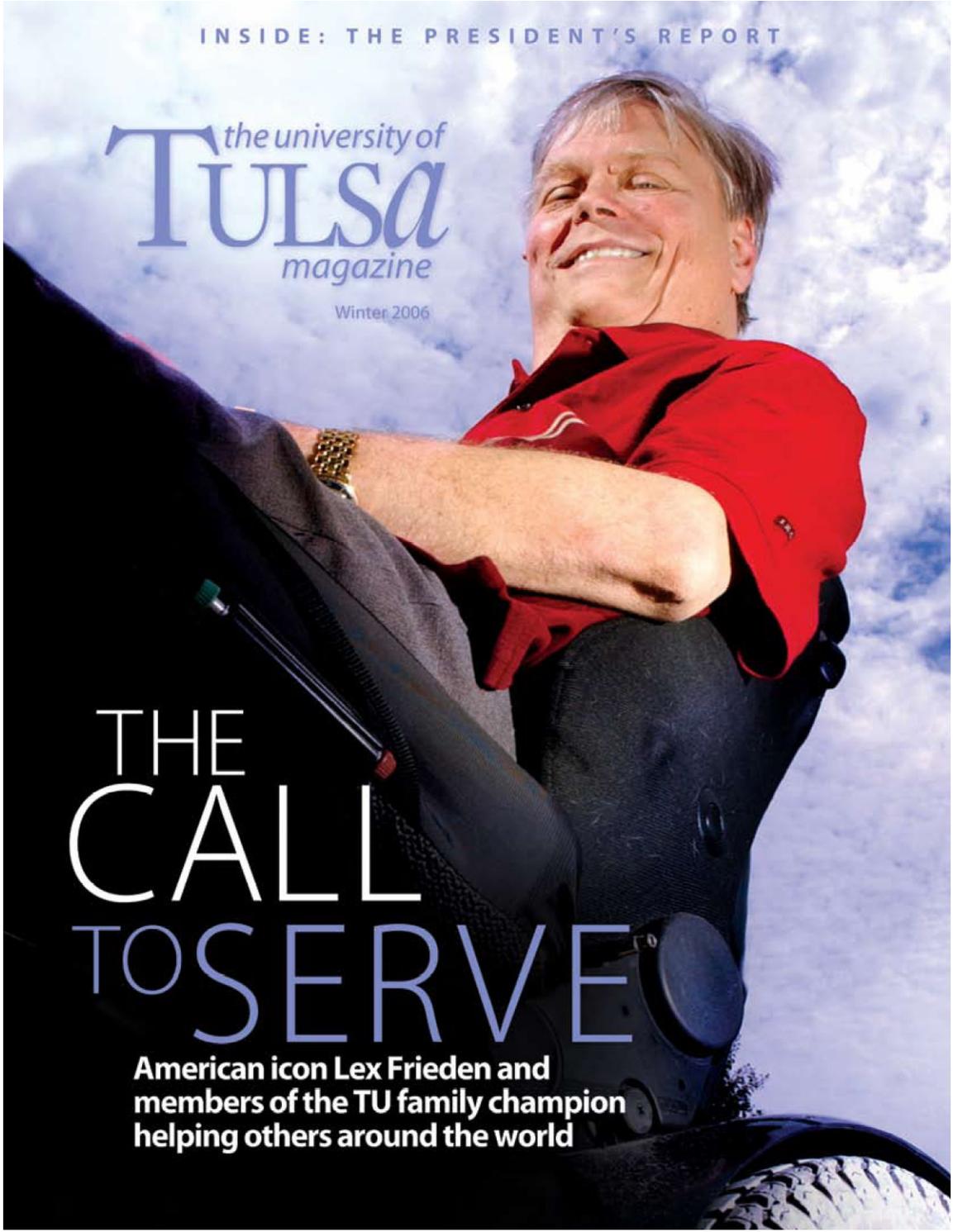
INSIDE: THE PRESIDENT'S REPORT

the university of  
**TULSA**  
magazine

Winter 2006

THE  
CALL  
TO SERVE

American icon Lex Frieden and  
members of the TU family champion  
helping others around the world



# the university of TULSA magazine

The University of Tulsa  
Magazine

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contents winter 2006

## features

### 9 ■ Service-Minded

At TU, "service" is a part of the University seal, advanced by the faculty and staff, and found at the heart of the student body.

### 14 ■ One Man's Loss, Humanity's Gain

A paralyzing car wreck in 1967 set Lex Frieden (BS '71) on the course to becoming a champion for people with disabilities around the world, including drafting the Americans with Disabilities Act.

### 23 ■ We Asked, You Answered

The spirit to serve remains long after the degree is earned. TU alumni share the ways they're making the world a better place.

### 26 ■ The Good, The Bad And The Dirty

Three TU graduates take their desire to serve on the road – or across the ocean. Krista Dawn Atchley (BA '04), Matthew Britton (BA '03) and Suzanne Carroll (BA '04) share their lives as Peace Corps volunteers.

### 30 ■ A Major In Social Commitment

From building a house to mentoring a child, TU students are as committed to helping others as they are to earning their degrees.

### 45 ■ Special Section: President's Report

President Steadman Upham reports on the latest progress and achievements for the University as well as his personal message to the community and alumni.

## departments

2 University News

4 Campus News

7 News from the U

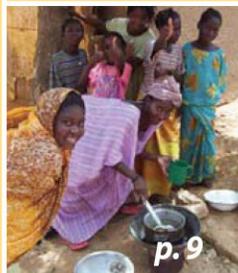
33 Athletics News

34 Alumni News

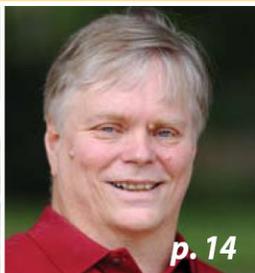
36 Classnotes

44 In Memoriam

53 Bookend



p. 9



p. 14



p. 23





# One Man's Loss... Humanity's Gain.

Now and again, someone very special comes along;

someone with seemingly endless energy and vision;

in essence, someone whose impact

on his or her fellow man is **i m m e a s u r a b l e**.

**L**ex Frieden (BS '71) is living, breathing proof of just such a person. A crusader for independence and equal opportunity, his life and career have been devoted to enriching every aspect of life for people with disabilities — people like him who do not allow a “disability” to stand in the way. From drafting the Americans with Disabilities Act, to serving as the chairperson of the National Council on Disability, Frieden epitomizes a passionate spirit that knows no limits.

The path our lives take may be shaped by experiences, but it's what we do with those experiences that determine who we become. Frieden didn't wake up one morning and say, “I'm going to change the world;” more likely, he woke up one morning and realized he had changed the world.

Frieden has witnessed firsthand the coronation of a queen in Amsterdam; accompanied the captain on a ferry bridge to Sweden; sat atop the Great Wall of China; been on the stadium field at Sydney, Australia's Olympic Village; vacationed in Copacabana, Rio; and cruised a river in British Columbia.

And that's only a sampling of Frieden's amazing life experiences. Yet, had it not been for a near fatal accident on November 18, 1967, his story would probably never be told. ▶▶▶

**Ozzie and Harriet Country.**

Frieden was born a healthy baby boy in Alva, Okla., where he grew up in a caring family and community.

“It was a very homogenous, supportive community where everybody looked out for everybody else,” Frieden said.

His father was a manager for a gas company; his mother a traditional mom and housewife.

The family was almost picture-perfect with the addition of a younger sister. The small farming community, population 7,000, had a graduating class of approximately 100. Frieden’s life could easily have doubled as the set for a 1950s television show.

“It was an Ozzie and Harriet country,” Frieden said. “I had a very nurturing childhood.”

A star student, he graduated as valedictorian of his high school class and enrolled at Oklahoma State University on a president’s scholarship in 1967.

But just a few months after attending his first college class, Frieden’s life took a dramatic turn.

He had nearly completed his first semester of college, ready to take advantage of a long Thanksgiving break.

That Saturday night, Frieden and four of his friends were drinking and driving through downtown Stillwater. At the same time, four other OSU students were doing the same thing in the opposite direction. The two cars crashed violently in a head-on collision and eight students were thrown in every direction — except for one.



Lex Frieden’s early years, shown here with his mother and father.



Frieden. Paramedics arrived at a scene with eight students strewn among mangled car parts and one trying to get out — but unable. Frieden sat helpless as his classmates were loaded into an ambulance before he was dragged from the backseat of a Camaro.

“I didn’t know what was wrong,” he said. “I couldn’t move and I hadn’t realized that I couldn’t feel anything.”

One nurse was on duty that night when the ambulance arrived at the campus infirmary with nine students in need of immediate medical attention.

“There were nine of us lined up at the campus clinic with one nurse who was used to taking care of coughs and flu,” he recalled.

The campus doctor, a gynecologist, was called in to help. With only outside appearances to go on, the nurse tried to treat the more severely injured students first. This meant if you weren’t bruised or bleeding, you’d have to wait. Frieden had no cuts, scrapes or bruises, so he lay on a cot unable to move, wondering what was wrong with him, waiting for the nurse to take him to the doctor.

“The nurse would come by and ask how I was

**LEX FRIEDEN: THE JOURNEY**

<p><b>1949</b> Frieden was born on March 5, 1949, in Alva, Okla.</p>	<p><b>1967</b> Injured in an automobile accident, resulting in quadriplegia</p>	<p><b>1971</b> Graduated Alva High School as valedictorian and voted “most likely to succeed” by classmates</p>	<p><b>1972</b> Graduated cum laude from The University of Tulsa with a degree in psychology</p>	<p><b>1975</b> Helped organize the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities and served as national secretary until 1977</p>
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doing and I told her I couldn't feel anything," Frieden said. "I kept saying I needed to see a doctor, and she determined I was just in shock, so she kept covering me with blankets. I was about to have a heat stroke."

Student after student, friend after friend went in to see the doctor while Frieden waited – unable to move, to feel, to get help.

When his turn finally came, his back was x-rayed several times, but the images revealed nothing. When the doctor left to examine the latest x-ray, Frieden suggested that the x-ray technician look a little higher. With that picture the reason Frieden couldn't get out of the car was now clear – his neck was shattered.

**Moment of Enlightenment.** At 2:00 a.m. on Sunday, November 19, 1967, Frieden was met at an Oklahoma City emergency room by Dr. Don Rhinehart (BS '54), a neurosurgeon who immediately operated on Frieden's neck. By the following weekend, Frieden was in a hospital room recovering.

"I remember the OU/OSU game was that weekend," Frieden said. "All I wanted was some milk and to watch the OU/OSU game. Isn't it funny how basic your wants become? I only wanted those two things – milk and to watch the game. I don't even remember what the score was."

Meanwhile, the other eight students had recovered from their injuries and resumed their busy lives, spending the Thanksgiving holiday weekend at home with their families.

Frieden spent the next six weeks, including Christmas, in a hospital room. Only months before, he'd left home as a young man searching for independence; now he found himself confined by four walls and a hospital bed. The accident that fateful night left him without the use of his legs or grip of his hands and only limited use of his arms. What he didn't know, however, was whether or not he would spend the rest of his life in that state, and whether or not he would ever walk again.

But that was about to change.

Naturally inquisitive, Frieden asked his nurse to read to him. Uninterested in fiction, his subjects of choice were medical books and the parts he wanted

read out loud were the neurology-related chapters. As he learned more about his injury, he repeatedly asked his doctor the same ominous question, "Will I walk again?" Each time the answer was mired in a sea of medical terminology.

"The doctors have to make sure you're psychologically ready to accept the reality," Frieden said.

That Christmas Eve, Frieden watched a movie on his hospital room television called, *The Men*. It concerned a war hero shot in the back in Korea who returned home paralyzed and told the story of his

**"There are people who have it all and do nothing with it and thus they achieve nothing. We all have so many gifts and talents — you just have to adjust."**

struggle adjusting to his disability. The movie spoke to Frieden for obvious reasons, and it revealed a reality he was struggling to uncover.

"I said, 'That's me.' It was a very enlightening moment," he said.

It confirmed Frieden's suspicions about his disability and his theory that he would never walk. Again, he approached his doctor for an answer.

"Each time I asked the doctor, I would refine my question using more medical terminology hoping to get an answer," he said. "As I got more evidence that my theory was correct, the doctor finally owned up to it."

For an 18-year-old, or anyone for that matter, it was a horrifying truth, a crucial moment in Frieden's life. How do you deal with the reality of that loss? Even today, the answer to this question is reflected in Frieden's eyes – eyes that have seen more wonders of

Helped organize the Houston Coalition for Barrier Free Living

1975

1976

Served on a consultant panel for the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science and Technology

Married his wife, Joyce, in front of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C.

1977

Prepared background paper for the White House Conference on Handicapped Individuals

Joined faculty of Baylor College of Medicine as research instructor, and cofounded the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities

1978

1979

Founded and became director of the Independent Living Research Utilization Program at TIRR (The Institute for Rehabilitation and Research) in Houston, Texas, and helped organize more than 400 centers for independent living throughout the U.S.

the world and accomplished more for his fellow man on two wheels than most of us can ever imagine achieving on two legs.

“Dr. Rhinehart told me, regardless, the key is to do as much as you can with what you have left,” Frieden recalled. “There are people who have it all and do nothing with it and thus they achieve nothing. We all have so many gifts and talents – you just have to adjust.”

The simplicity with which Frieden describes that “adjustment” is the foundation of his life today. It’s the reason he has dined at Kennebunkport with former President George Bush, sat in the Oval Office with President George W. Bush, written several books, received an honorary doctorate in law from the University of Ireland as well as two Presidential Citations and many other honors.

**One in a Million.** Frieden’s story could end there – that he was in a car wreck, became a quadriplegic and went on to work relentlessly on behalf of people with disabilities across the world. It makes a great story and it’s the truth. But the challenges he has faced along the path are what reveal how one man becomes a leader and activist for millions.

In January 1968, two months after his accident, Frieden spent three months at The Institute for Rehabilitation and Research (TIIRR) in Houston, a center that would later become an important part of his life.

Frieden accepted he would never walk again, that his body was disabled. But his mind was not. By August of the same year, Frieden was ready to return to pursuing a college degree.

“I figured what happened to me was something that happened to one in a million, so I thought, ‘I’m going to have this unique experience,’” he said.

He remembered noticing a handicapped student at



Lex, with wife Joyce, circa 1975.

OSU and the difficulties that student encountered due to lack of accessible facilities. Because of that memory, he chose not to return to the school and began researching other institutions.

He discovered Oral Roberts University – a then-new college in Tulsa with the latest technology, buildings and an impressive campus with one-level entrances – all important for a person in a wheelchair.

About the same time, ONEOK acquired the gas company that employed his father, transferring him to Tulsa. So the young valedictorian and presidential scholar applied to ORU and waited for his acceptance letter. A rejection letter arrived instead.

Frieden thought the letter was a mistake. He even called the school to tell them they made an error and mailed the wrong letter. He talked to the dean of admissions who said his grades, test scores and letter of recommendation were all impressive, but he couldn’t come to ORU because he indicated on his application use of a wheelchair.

Frieden assured him that he would not be an imposition; that he’d already visited the campus and it was perfect for him. He even offered to bring his grandfather with him to help. But, at that time in the country, not accommodating people with disabilities was the social norm, a widely accepted practice.

Frieden’s disability was reason enough for rejection.

Received master’s of social psychology from the University of Houston	Honored by U.S. Jaycees as one of America’s Ten Outstanding Young Men	Received presidential citation from President Ronald Reagan
1979	1980	1983
Named TU Distinguished Alumnus	Awarded World Rehabilitation Fund Fellowship to study programs for disabled people in Europe	1984-88
		1988
		Served as executive director of the National Council on the Handicapped (known today as the National Council on Disability) where he led writing the proposal for the Americans with Disabilities Act

He dropped the phone and, as the receiver swung by its cord, he sat in shock and disbelief. It was three days before he told his parents what happened.

"I was in a catatonic state for three days," he said. "Breaking my neck didn't bother me. Being turned down because of my disability – that bothered me."

Even after a disabling car wreck, a life-saving surgery, and learning to live without the use of his arms and legs, it was one phone call that made him feel helpless.

**Miracle in a Parking Lot.** A family friend, Tom Coffman (BSBA '63, JD '66), suggested to Frieden's father that he consider The University of Tulsa. Frieden wasn't encouraged, knowing that TU was an older university with older buildings. That was the same reason he had decided against returning to OSU, but he also wanted an education, and he was determined.

He set aside his concerns and arranged to meet with the dean of the college of education, Elmer Ferneau. He was considering studying to be a school teacher, a logical profession for someone in a wheelchair, but it was not the career Frieden desired.

The dean suggested they meet outside his office, in the parking lot. Frieden wheeled out of a van onto the black asphalt where the dean was waiting. They discussed Frieden's real interest, a degree in engineering and he faced again the loss of hope. TU's College of Engineering and Natural Sciences was three miles away from campus. As they explored the list of degree possibilities, barriers continued to emerge because of older buildings, too many steps, inaccessible floors, etc.

As Frieden grew increasingly discouraged, the dean of students, Harry Carter, joined them on the asphalt and pointed to a building under construction. He said it included a level entrance and an elevator, and would be completed by the time Frieden wanted to enroll. It would be the only building Frieden could



Top Left: Lex with grandson, Trey O'Conner. Top Right: Lex gets around – and he's a pro at it. Above: Lex, with one of his best friends, Lance.

access with little or no help.

"He told me to figure out what classes I wanted to take, call him and those classes would be offered in the new building," Frieden recalled. "It was a stroke of genius and that was the miracle that occurred in the parking lot."

The building housing all Frieden's future classes was Oliphant Hall, and it provided him with access to education. It also showed Frieden a progressive way of thinking – one that involved simplicity and solutions – exactly what he'd need for his future endeavors.

Three years later, in 1971, Frieden graduated with a B.S. in psychology.

**Assume Responsibility.** While Frieden was attending classes at TU, a new group was forming in Tulsa called WIN—Win Independence Now – with the goal of making the community more open and accessible to people with disabilities.

1989-90	1990	1991	1995	1996-2000
Represented the U.S. on a disability and employment panel at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris, France	Americans with Disabilities Act signed into law	Became senior vice president at TIRR (The Institute for Rehabilitation and Research)	Awarded presidential citation from President George H.W. Bush	Appointed professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Baylor College of Medicine
				Served as chairman of the American Association of People with Disabilities

Frieden wanted nothing to do with the group. "I was not interested in joining a club for the disabled," he said.

Against his protests, Frieden's father took him to a WIN meeting. Frieden sat through the duration of the meeting with tears of anger in his eyes and by the time it was over, he was ready to put WIN behind him with no intention of ever getting involved.

But like the car wreck that paralyzed him, this too was another unexpected situation that would have a huge impact on his life.

Three days after the meeting, Frieden received a phone call from Mike Phillips, a man he didn't remember from the group. Holding firm against becoming involved with WIN, he told Phillips he was not interested. But Phillips was relentless and by the end of the conversation, Frieden agreed to proofread the organization's new bylaws. Thus began a life-long relationship that played a large part in shaping Frieden's remarkable path.

The group explored and discussed what society's responsibility is to those with disabilities. As a result of their efforts, many significant changes were made in the infrastructure of Tulsa from ramps on sidewalks and public transportation for people with disabilities, to passing an ordinance that required all public buildings be handicapped accessible.

"It was very progressive at the time," Frieden said. "These actions really had an impact on my life. I began learning how people can assume responsibility for affecting their own community and environment. Tulsa was conservative, but also receptive."

**Reasonable Accommodations.** After completing his degree at TU, Frieden went to graduate school at the University of Houston with a teaching fellowship. He began working with TIRR, the same rehabilitation center he attended following his accident, on an experimental program to put former patients in a communal setting. This allowed him to live away from home without needing an independent caretaker. It also led to his current position as senior vice president of TIRR and director of its Independent Living Research Utilization Program.

But while earning his master's degree in social and environmental psychology, he continued to be

involved in overcoming real-life barriers.

"I began finding ways to contribute in addition to my own edification," he said.

In 1973 the Rehabilitation Act passed, which included a provision that said any federal building must be accessible to those with handicaps. Because of Frieden's previous work with local organizations, he was invited to Washington, D.C., in 1975 to help answer a question – what should a federal building do if it's not reasonable to make it completely handicapped accessible?

Frieden recalled the "miracle" in the TU parking lot and the answer was evident – it should do the best it can under the circumstances. The concept became known as "reasonable accommodation" and the phrase exists in every disability law today.

Again Frieden's purpose evolved, and he saw how the law could assist people. He became more involved in the political process and influencing change.

**Frieden recalled the "miracle" in the TU parking lot ... the concept became known as "reasonable accommodation" and the phrase exists in every disability law today.**

**New Challenges, New Skills.** Frieden began emerging as a leader in the independent living movement and was a consultant panel member for the United States House of Representatives' Committee on Science and Technology from 1976 through 1978. He prepared a background paper on Community and Residential Based Housing for the 1977 White House Conference on Handicapped Individuals. In 1984, he was named executive director of the National Council on the Handicapped and was instrumental

Selected as member of U.N. Panel of Experts on the Standard Rules for Disability

1990

Received the Henry B. Betts Award for "efforts that significantly improve the quality of life for people with disabilities"

Served as president of Rehabilitation International, a federation of 200 national and international organizations and agencies in 90 countries working for the rehabilitation of people with disabilities, and for the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities and their families within society

2000-2004

2002

Appointed by President George W. Bush and confirmed by the U.S. Senate as chairperson of the National Council on Disability

Awarded an honorary doctorate in law (L.L.D.) by the National University of Ireland

2004

in constructing the first draft of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

As Frieden's political life became more prominent, so did travel demands. For a wheelchair-user, this was not an easy task. He continually experienced the frustrations he was fighting to correct, fueling his desire to make the nation more accessible to everyone.

"You can either accept a challenge as a frustration, or you can approach it with a problem-solving spirit and look for a way around it," Frieden said. "Every challenge met and overcome is a new skill acquired that you can use for the next challenge."

As doors opened in America for people with disabilities, Frieden began wondering what was occurring elsewhere in the world. In 1980, he received a grant to travel to Scandinavia to see how they addressed disability.

"At the time, Sweden was regarded as the most socially advanced country," he said. "You can't learn everything by reading. There are scenes the author fails to describe, so I decided to move there for the summer."

Frieden, along with his wife, Joyce, also paralyzed due to a rare disease known as encephalomyelitis, headed to Sweden. But while en route an airline strike ensued leaving them stranded in Amsterdam. Frieden looked at the inconvenience as a new challenge and met it head on by securing the wheelchair-dependent couple a place to stay and transportation. As a result of an inconvenience – the strike – they were able to attend the queen's coronation in Amsterdam.

Next to the captain, atop the bridge of a sea-going ferry, the Friedens arrived in Sweden a few days later.

"Why did I break my neck? Maybe it was to have all these wonderful experiences. You learn, accept, move on and do the best you can with what you've got," he said.

From his time in Sweden, Frieden wrote a book that was widely circulated there. In it, he noted that in trying to help those with disabilities, Sweden had actually created a patronizing society in which they care for the handicapped rather than help them become independent.

**As Independent as Possible.** "I think people quite naturally want to be as independent as they can be," Frieden said. "It's important for us to organize society in such a way that people can achieve their own goals and be as independent as possible in spite of their disabilities."

"It's really sad that people spend their whole lives building a home and creating a lifestyle they enjoy, but when they become disabled or elderly they have to

## One Alumna's Admiration

**D**UE TO A FIGHT WITH POLIO in 1937, Jill Tarbel (BA '46) now travels by way of a motorized wheelchair. She's not only seen and experienced the changes brought on by the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, she's fought for them.

Tarbel served as secretary for the American Coalition for Citizens with Disabilities, and through this organization became personally acquainted with Lex Frieden.

"Lex is a great man," Tarbel said. "He has learned to live with his disability and help others do the same."

Tarbel believes Frieden has borrowed from the supportive nature he found at TU when the University went out of its way to make classes accessible to him.

"I think he's made it a vocation to help other people by getting laws passed," she said. "The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) is making the world accessible to everybody, and Lex had a lot to do with that."

As people with disabilities become more mobile throughout the United States, Frieden is turning his efforts to seeing that same freedom afforded to those in other countries. His tireless work ethic is only outshined by his inspiring attitude.

"Lex is an amazing man," Tarbel said. "I've never seen him down on his disposition. He's always positive with a great attitude."



*Editor's note: TU Trustee Emerita Jill Tarbel has changed the landscape of Tulsa and Oklahoma in her own fight for people with disabilities. As a civil rights activist, she has served on the Mayor's Commission on Concerns of the Disabled, the Oklahoma Advisory of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, the Tulsa Area Alliance on Disabilities, Oklahoma Coalition for Citizens with Disabilities and the American Coalition for Citizens with Disabilities. As a community activist, Tarbel has served on the boards of the Tulsa Junior College Foundation, River Parks Authority, Tulsa Senior Services, Philbrook Museum, Tulsa Opera, Planned Parenthood and the Hillcrest Foundation. She was recognized by The University of Tulsa as a Distinguished Alumna in 1995, and the following year, Tulsa Area Alliance on Disabilities created the Jill and Brook Tarbel Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1996, she was inducted into the Tulsa Hall of Fame, and in 2001 Tarbel joined Oklahoma's most prestigious women when inducted into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame.*

leave that environment. It's not natural and we have to do whatever we can to avoid that."

Frieden's dedication and efforts led to the Americans with Disabilities Act, which he helped conceive, draft and pass in 1990. It stands firm today to rid the nation of discrimination against people with disabilities. In 2002, he was appointed by President George W. Bush and confirmed by the Senate as the chairperson of the National Council on Disability. With this distinctive appointment, Frieden was charged with making recommendations on disability policy issues to the President and Congress.

His work in the independent living movement carries on today. He continues to serve as senior vice president and director of TIRR's Independent Living Research Utilization Program where he began his rehab and recovery.

And Frieden became a teacher after all – he's a professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Baylor College of Medicine.

"The efficacy of the independent living concept is being proven each day by more and more severely disabled individuals as they choose to assume the responsibilities of directing their own lives and as they become active participants in the mainstream of life in their communities," he said.

His political involvement has neither ceased nor slowed with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. He's a member of the United Nations Panel of Experts on the Standard Rules for Disability and immediate past president of Rehabilitation International, a federation of 200 organizations and agencies in 90 countries working for the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities and their families within society and for the rehabilitation of people with disabilities.

**A Life Destined.** Not many people can say one single day changed their lives. In Frieden's case, not only can he say one day changed his life, he can name the precise date and moment this life-altering change occurred.

On this particular day in one man's life - November 18, 1967 – Lex Frieden's new journey began. It began with an attitude, will and spirit far stronger and more enduring than the force of the two colliding cars.

Since that fateful day in 1967, Frieden has made every day thereafter count. His work has been relentless and his commitment unwavering. Frieden's innate character may have destined him for greatness, but his life experiences have shaped a zealous crusader; a man responsible for infusing hope and independence into the lives of many.

## High Praise

Frieden has earned national recognition, national honor and national gratitude for his lifetime of service.

