

Kunken '72 Inspires C.U. Community With His Story

By DAN FREEDMAN
Sun Staff Writer

Ken Kunken '72 played for Cornell's football team during its 1970 season until a collision in a game against Columbia University severed his spinal cord and left him almost totally paralyzed from the shoulders down. Yesterday evening, Kunken elucidated the ways in which he has achieved long-term goals since his injury and encouraged a greater appreciation for both the needs and capabilities of disabled students in the Cornell community. Kunken's lecture was part of a special presentation that Cornell Student Disability Services (SDS) and the Cornell Union for Disabilities Awareness (CUDA) co-sponsored in the ILR Conference Center.

At the end of the 1969 Cornell Football season, Coach Bob Cullen told Kunken, "You've got the instinct, damn it, but you're not strong enough." Kunken carried this message home to Long Island where he trained heavily over the summer. Upon returning to Cornell in the fall, Kunken was offered several varsity substitution positions on the team.

At the time, Kunken was overjoyed and bemused by his luck. His grades were good — he had planned a rigorous course of study in Industrial Engineering — and

he was playing the sport he loved. Even when a gas barbecue exploded around him that fall at a friend's cabin on Cayuga Lake, Kunken miraculously remained unharmed.

"I felt invincible," Kunken said in reference to the explosion. "The next day I broke my neck."

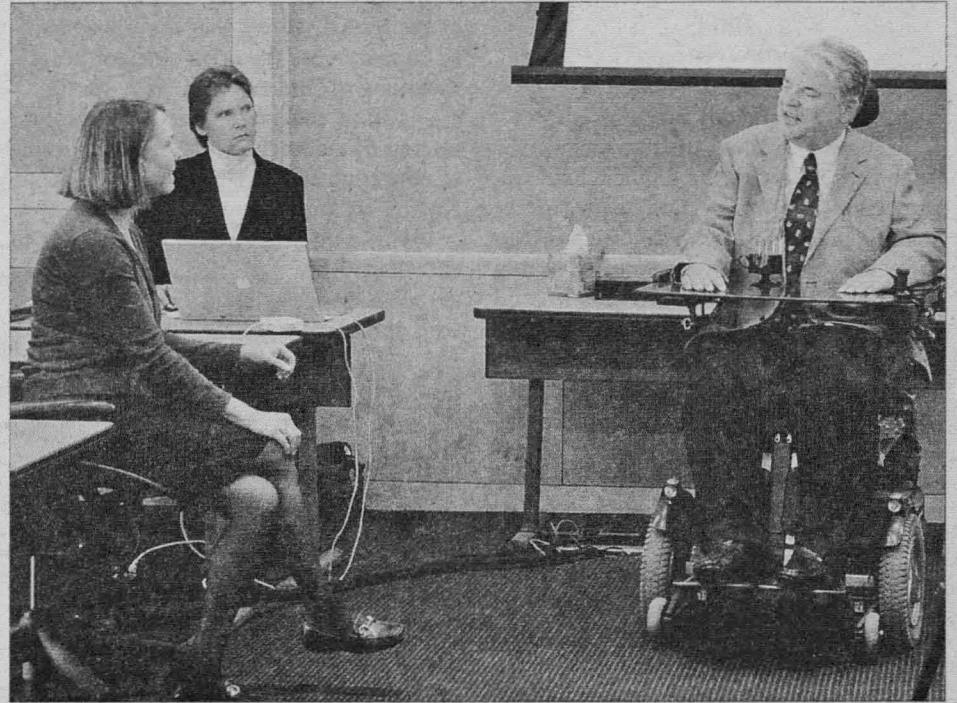
After the accident, Kunken spent nine months in different hospitals, engaged in intensive physical therapy. While doctors provided him with a dismal recovery outlook, Kunken resolved to realize his goals and lead a useful and productive life.

"I knew I had a choice to make," Kunken explained. "I could have pity for myself or I could regroup and go back to school, so I decided to return to Cornell and get my degree."

Kunken returned, however, to a different Cornell. Now that Kunken was wheelchair bound, campus features that he had once taken for granted were inhibitive obstacles, like the fifteen steps between him and Prof. James Maas's PSYCH 1101: Introduction to Psychology class in Bailey Hall.

"There was not one ramp on campus in 1971," Kunken said. "Keep in mind this was 15-20 years before the Americans with Disabilities Act."

Since that time, Sung Min Kim '10, co-



DIEGO OLVERA / SUN STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Triumph despite tragedy | Ken Kunken '72 gave a lecture yesterday about his experiences when he was paralyzed as a Cornell football player.

president of CUDA, noted that Cornell has dramatically improved the integration of disabled facilities on campus.

"Cornell funds accessibility for many buildings ... we could still improve funding

for events that allow disabled and non-disabled students to come together," Kim said.

Kathryn Fahey, director of Cornell SDS,

See **KUNKEN** page 6

Disabled Alum Inspires Students With Story

DISABILITIES

Continued from page 3

described a new undertaking that may provide a forum for Kim's suggestion.

"We are currently in a planning period for strategically integrating better accessibility in the curriculum," Fahey said. Fahey hopes that easier communication between disabled students and teachers via the Internet and better online access to class material will help achieve this goal.

"All students that come to Cornell deserve the same opportunities," Fahey said.

Even though Ken Kunken may have missed out on these curricular aids, he chose to view the difficulties of his time simply as challenges needed to be overcome in order to earn his bachelor of science from the College of Engineering in 1972. Kunken went on to earn a master of arts in education from Cornell, a master of education degree in psychology from Columbia and national certification as a rehabilitation counselor.

After two years of providing vocational counseling for severely disabled individuals, Kunken went on to earn his juris doctorate from Hofstra University at the age of 32 and became an assistant district attorney in Nassau County, Long Island. Almost 30 years later, Kunken is now the deputy bureau chief of the County Court Trial Bureau where he supervises 27 other assistant district attorneys.

As Kunken looks back on his life's hardships, he credits his family, both his own parents and his current wife and three sons with helping him overcome his personal obstacles.

"Despite living the last 38 years in a wheelchair, I am living my dream," Kunken said. "It's not a matter of being blessed with good luck. You have to make it happen. ... If I leave you with a message, remember the hopes and dreams of your youth. Good things come to you when you work for them."

Dan Freedman can be reached at dfreedman@cornellsun.com.