

# Disabilities law opens doors



Ken Kunken, with wife Anna and their triplets, from left, Jimmy, Timmy and Joey says the Americans with Disabilities Act is a "quite a tribute" to Kennedy.

**K**UNKEN is a deputy bureau chief for Nassau County's court trial bureau. He's a husband, and father of triplets. He's also a quadriplegic.

And he says he owes a lot to Sen. Edward Kennedy.

In 1971, six months after Kunken was paralyzed by a spinal cord injury suffered while playing on Cornell University's lightweight football team, he spoke before Kennedy's health subcommittee at Hofstra.

The Levittown native told the senator he could not find health insurance coverage for the long-term care he needed.

After completing his undergraduate engineering degree and then earning a law degree from Hofstra, he got a job with the district attorney's office. But the swinging front doors of the courtrooms were too narrow for his wheelchair.

"After all that work, I couldn't even get into the courtroom," he recalled yesterday.

The county widened the doors of the courtroom where Kunken was assigned, and gradually adjusted others, he said. Then the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted, and the county created accessible jury boxes and witness stands — even a judge's bench.

Through changes to curbs and railroads, theaters and restaurants, Kunken can take public transportation from his Rockville Centre home to Manhattan, see a show and treat his wife to dinner.

"That's quite a tribute to Sen. Kennedy," said Kunken, 59, who can move his head, right shoulder and left arm.

Kennedy's health care reforms have helped him, too. Kunken's father's health insurance company, which had covered him since his accident, dropped him when he got married, Kunken said.

The law known as COBRA allowed him to extend his coverage for three years.

— JENNIFER MALONEY