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The First Year Back

When Ken Kunken '72 returned to Cornell last September to register, many people were surprised to see him. Exactly ten months earlier, Ken had been totally paralyzed in a football accident, making him the first athlete in university history to be permanently disabled while wearing a Cornell uniform.

By Roger Archibald '68

ON THE LAST DAY of October 1970, while the university was adjourned for citizenship recess, Ken Kunken '72 got his first chance to play in a 150-pound football game. He wasn't a starter, but was on the special kick-off and punting team known in football as the "suicide squad" because of the greater risk of injury such open-field play involves.

Under a steady drizzle in the second quarter, Kenny went back onto Lower Alumni Field for the kick-off after Cornell had scored its second touchdown against Columbia. Streaking downfield, he tackled the receiver perfectly, making the first contact with his helmet, toppling the runner backwards.

"You don't often get a chance to hit like that," Ken now says. "They'll usually see you coming, and make an evasive move, and you end up hitting them with your shoulder or arms. But this guy was trying to avoid another tackler and didn't see me."

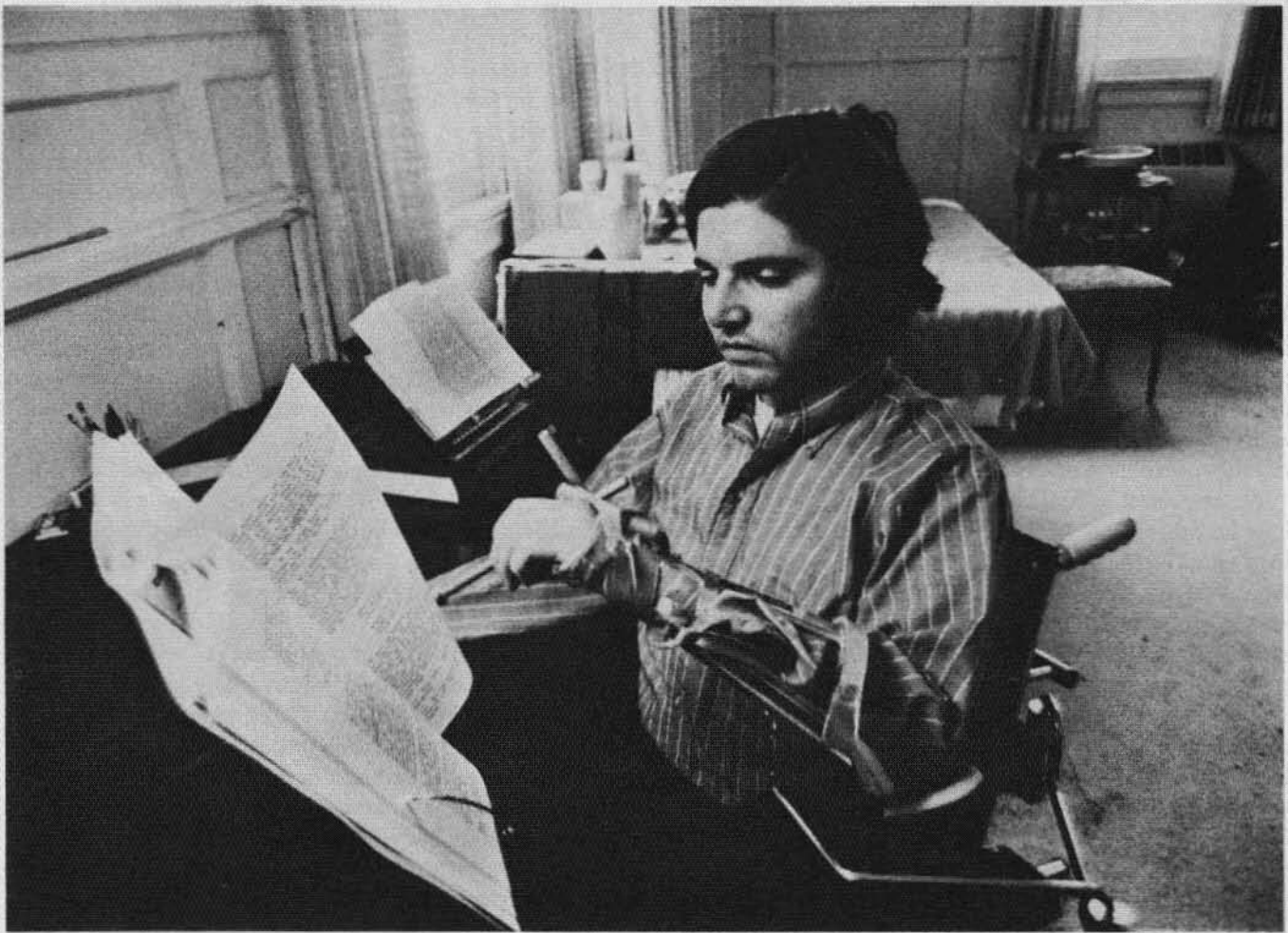
Ken felt a sudden "electric shock" jolt through his body; then nothing. It was the last body sensation he is ever likely to feel. The tackle had forced his head downward, fracturing the fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae and clinically severing the spinal cord.

"At first, I didn't think it was any more serious than a pinched nerve," says Kenny, who was conscious

throughout the ordeal. But X-rays later revealed how close he had come to death. Had the injury occurred only slightly higher, between the third and fourth cervical vertebrae, it would have involved nerve tissue controlling vital body functions and would most likely have been fatal. Any unnecessary movement of his head and neck while on the field could have killed him instantly.

After the extent of his injuries was discovered at Tompkins County Hospital, he was taken immediately to Arnot-Ogden Hospital in Elmira where he received four weeks of intensive care. Then, at the end of November 1970, no longer on the critical list, Ken was transferred to South Nassau Community Hospital in his hometown of Oceanside, Long Island, where he started a daily program of physical therapy. By New Year's, he had detected the first feeling in his shoulders and upper arms, but doctors discouraged any hope that this might be a sign of eventual recovery. Still, the proximity of his family, relatives and old friends helped boost his morale.

On March 1, 1971 he made yet another move, this time to the famed Rusk Institute of Rehabilitative Medicine in New York City. Kenny was optimistic at first. He was aware of the near-miracles Rusk had achieved with such patients as Roy Campanella, and he knew they didn't admit cases they thought were beyond hope.



But, at first, he found Rusk a great let-down. At both Elmira and Oceanside, he had been a special patient and received particular attention. At Rusk, he was just another quadriplegic.

The highly professional manner of the staff seemed to leave no room for personal consideration. Visitors came less frequently, the therapy was far more rigorous (four hours a day), and the doctors were in no way encouraging.

Finally, Ken realized what the doctors had known since he was injured: that he was *permanently* paralyzed. Facing the reality of a lifetime without movement, Kenny lapsed into the lowest depression of his entire ordeal.

That was in April, five months after the accident. But it was also only five months before Ken returned to Cornell to resume his studies.

The profound change that occurred in those five months started with little things. He was allowed to go home for a Passover seder; he testified before a Senate sub-committee on health, chaired by Senator Edward Kennedy; as spring arrived and schools let out, the number of visitors grew; he started getting evenings off on a regular basis.

By mid-May, there was reason to be medically opti-

mistic as well. Ken had begun to regain control of the triceps muscle in his left arm. This meant that with the aid of wrist splints and a special kind of elbow pivot known as a BFO (Balanced Forearm Orthosis), he could learn to do such things as feed himself, operate an electric wheelchair, and use a typewriter. He began to feel much less helpless.

Kenny was also aware of the efforts others were making for him. Bob Cullen, the coach of the Cornell 150's, had been in constant touch with him ever since the injury. In Ithaca, Cullen had established the Ken Kunken Fund and was hard at work raising money for it. Another fund was started for him in Oceanside, and the Columbia 150's, the team he had been playing against when injured, organized several money-raising activities for his benefit.

It was probably Ken's brother Stephen, however, who played the most significant role in his victory over depression. Earlier Steve had encouraged Kenny to "keep at it." He now reminded Ken the doctors had been wrong before; they could be wrong again. Ken valued the advice highly. "My brother and I are very, very close," he says.

The interest so many others had in his condition was also a great incentive. "It got to the point where I thought I'd be letting them down," Kenny now admits. Then, in July, he met Betsy Ross, an Ithaca College phys-

ical therapy major who had a summer job at Rusk.

Perhaps because she had been present at the game in which Kenny was injured, Betsy took a special interest in his case, something uncommon among Rusk therapists. Whatever the reason, the two developed a rapport which has continued to grow back in Ithaca. "She was my first date after getting hurt," Ken remembers. "We went to the movies in the city. She's a good friend . . . a really good friend."

Kenny was as surprised as anyone at his abrupt return to Cornell. As late as July, the ALUMNI NEWS had reported that "Cornell's climate and its lack of ramps or elevators would make schooling an almost impossibility in Ithaca." There was some thought that Kenny might enter Columbia in January as a day student, while continuing to live at Rusk.

Nevertheless, in September, only ten days out of Rusk, here he was back at Cornell, ready to tackle a full course load of industrial engineering. "It happened almost overnight," explained Coach Cullen. "One day in August, we got a call from Rusk. They said they had done all they could for him, and that the best thing for him now was to get back into school."

The Coach had recommended all along that Ken try to come back to Cornell, knowing he would have a "home field" advantage. Most of his friends were still in Ithaca, and the accident was still on people's minds. "We can handle this," Cullen told Kenny.

The return became feasible when the Cornell financial aids office came up with a "package deal" that covered all his educational costs. It granted him a total of \$35,000 to be used over a five year period. (It now appears that Ken will be able to graduate next June, leaving him three more years of financial aid for graduate school.)

The \$7,000 yearly budget includes a \$550 subsidy from the New York State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, but nearly all of it comes from student financial aid resources. The plan covers all tuition and fees, room and board for himself and his attendant, book and material costs, plus part of the attendant's salary. The only restriction is that the money must be used at Cornell.

Other arrangements for Kenny's return were handled with equal speed. With the help of the Dean of Students Office, a lounge was remodeled in Sage Graduate Center to make a bedroom conveniently close to his classes. It is also well situated for meals, right across the hall from the dining room, and only a few steps above ground level.

Cullen was left with the difficult task of finding Ken's full-time attendant for the school year. It was a job which offered little in the way of compensation, but demanded the ability to take care of all Kenny's needs, as well as the temperament to be a compatible roommate.

Cullen hoped he could find somebody without too much difficulty, but certainly he never expected a suitable candidate to walk into his own home. "I was just sitting in my back yard, mulling the whole thing over, when who comes along but Dave McMurray selling Fuller brushes."

Dave had played on the lightweight football team in 1968, before a knee injury forced him to give it up. Since graduating as a chemical engineer several months earlier, he had stayed around Ithaca, teaching tennis at the faculty courts and selling brushes part time. Although they had never played together on the team, he was interested in Kunken's condition. Uncertain about his future, Dave had made no definite plans for the coming school year. Cullen informed him about the need for an attendant. Dave was interested, and asked the coach to keep him in mind. A short time later he accepted the job.

Despite these preparations, however, Ken's readjustment to student life was anything but easy. Nagging little problems bothered him at first: an unsuitable desk, a wheel chair that was uncomfortably narrow. "Just trying to get used to normal life after ten months in the hospital is hard for anybody," is all Ken will say. But more could be said. The anonymity of being one of many paralytic patients in a specialized environment had upset Ken while he was at Rusk, but may have had its comforting aspects.

There are also continuing health concerns. Even catching a common cold might create a problem. Dr. Leroy Young, the Gannett Clinic physician who takes care of all Kenny's medical needs on campus, observes that "With the problems he has in clearing his throat and coughing, treatment would be far more difficult in his case." Since his body does not generate the heat usually produced by body movement, Ken becomes chilled easily and always wears a coat.

Transportation problems loomed large until they were overcome. "On the first day, getting to class was a real joke," Kenny says. "Dave pulled me up nine steps into Upson only to find out the class was in the basement of Kimball, so we had to go down about thirty more. We must have gone up and down about a hundred steps that day." Dave soon found alternate routes and available elevators so that the meanderings of the first day were not often repeated, and one class was relocated for Kenny's convenience.

Problems of studying were less easily resolved. "With the arm braces, I can turn pages all right, but when you're studying engineering, you often have to keep referring back to previous pages and work out formulas at the same time. This was a real difficulty for me."

With his background in engineering, Dave was able to help Kenny with much of his school work, and at first he did all Ken's note-taking during lectures. But as the year progressed many of Kenny's Sigma Nu fraternity brothers, his freshman roommate Robert Skelly '72, and teammate John Reynolds '73 pitched in. They provided Ken with carbon copies of their own notes, briefed him on much of the outside reading, and came to his room before exams to help him study.

Taking exams was also a problem at first. When a test was administered orally by the teacher, Ken felt that he was under too much pressure. So he arranged to take them in a different room from the rest of the class, dic-

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tating his responses to Dave.

Beyond these concessions, however, the real effort toward getting a diploma had to be Ken's, and he knew it. Before classes started, Cullen had told him that the faculty would make "no special academic considerations" for him. Much in the way he probably addresses his football players before an important game, Cullen had warned, "Nobody's going to feel sorry for you."

As a freshman, his grades had been so poor that he was prevented from playing sports, and at the time of his injury he was still in academic danger. Now, despite his handicaps, he posted a 3.02 average for Fall term, which included a B and B+, respectively, in two difficult math courses, probability and computer science.

He feels he got the most, however, from Psychology 101, an elective he had been taking before the injury. He had been able to continue the course while hospitalized, thanks to the help of Prof. James Maas, PhD '66, who sent him tape recorded lectures. He completed the course last fall term, with a new interest in the field and a grade of A-.

AFTER THE ORDEAL he has been through, certainly nobody could blame Kenny if he chose to criticize the roughness of football. But that has just not been the case. He now enjoys watching the game as much as he once enjoyed playing.

His dedication to the game seems almost fanatical. While explaining his feelings about football recently, Ken recalled a television documentary he had seen several months before about a well-known linebacker in the NFL who stated, "The perfect way of dying is to make the perfect tackle."

"I really saw myself saying that," Kenny exclaimed. "It was really me."

He views his injury as a quirk of fate ("one of the breaks of the game"), and maintains an almost macabre detachment when discussing it. "If I had to get hurt, I can't think of any other way I could rationalize having it done—not in a swimming pool . . . car accident . . . drunk." He has seen the actual play on film several times: "Not too many guys get a chance to watch themselves break their own neck."

Much of his spare time this year was spent watching athletic events, either on the field or on television, with Dave and Betsy. "We do catch a lot of sports—all the 150's games, hockey games, a few lacrosse games and

even a practice now and then . . ." Remembering the play-off status, at the time, of his hometown favorites, he quickly added, ". . . Oh yeah, Knicks and Rangers too."

Less provincially, Dave McMurray corrected Ken, "You mean Lakers and Bruins."

The two men seem to have reached an equilibrium, despite Ken's dependence on Dave. The physical functions which Dave must perform for Ken include almost every controlled movement that a human being makes in the course of a day. There was a time back at Rusk when Kenny thought he could get along without an attendant. In a fit of independence, he drove off down the corridors and up the elevators in the electric wheel chair which he had just learned to operate. "But I almost destroyed myself," he recalls. "I just missed getting caught on the roof in a rain storm, and returning, I got my arm stuck in the elevator door and had to be helped out."

The incident underscored Kenny's continual need for an attendant, even though he has now attained a small degree of self-sufficiency. With the aid of his braces, splints and electric wheel chair he can feed himself, type ten words per minute, turn pages, and answer a special loud-speaker telephone. But without Dave he could not do even that much; it is Dave who must always fit him with this special apparatus.

During a typical day, Dave gets Ken out of bed, dresses him, brings meals to him in the room, wheels him to and from class (which always involves going up and down stairs), bathes him, administers his range of motion exercises (manipulation of the limbs designed to tone muscles and aid circulation much the way stretching does in a healthy body), helps him with his studying, and puts him to bed. Even then, the job doesn't end. Since starting last fall, Dave has hardly had a full night's sleep; he gets up several times each night and turns Kenny to a different position to prevent bed sores.

With such demands being made on Dave, and given Ken's independent spirit, the potential for conflict between the two would seem ever-present. If it exists, however, it is not apparent to anyone else. Dave carries out Kenny's requests without hesitation, Ken appears to be tactful and considerate in making them, and while Ken avoids asking help from others around him, he seems very matter-of-fact in accepting Dave's assistance. When Dave is leaving the room, he makes sure Ken is equipped to answer his phone. Asked if he always does this, Dave replied with a grin, "Yes . . . unless I'm mad at him."

In this atmosphere of give and take, the two have

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successfully completed Ken's first year back at Cornell, and the part that Dave played cannot be overemphasized. Serving as Kenny's "arms and legs," Dave says, has helped him decide about his own future. "I had no immediate plans last summer," he says. "Now, I think I'd enjoy working in a hospital." With his background in chemical engineering, he feels that with some additional training he could become a hospital lab technician, or perhaps a physical therapist. This summer, after Kenny has gone home, Dave plans to move to Nashville, Tennessee, to live with friends and try to find such a job.

As for Ken, his future plans have been shaped somewhat too. He recently found a new talent for which he is already in demand: public speaking. After giving physical therapy students at Ithaca College a patient's eye view of rehabilitation, Ken was invited to speak to one hundred students at the Cornell Medical School in New York City, and last month he was due to deliver his first graduation address, at Dryden Central High School, near Ithaca. Next fall, he is planning to take a Communications Arts elective in public speaking. "The more I talk in public," he says, "the more I realize I need a course in public speaking."

Ken hopes, in time, to put some of his engineering knowledge to use, designing devices to aid the handicapped. And he also thinks he could make a real contribution in the field of clinical psychology. "I can see a need for important work in this area," he says, "especially with the handicapped . . . I know a great deal more about what these people can do, how they think." Next fall, he will be one of a handful of undergraduate teaching assistants in Psychology 101, the course he enjoyed so much last year, in which he plans to teach a seminar on "The Psychology of the Physically Handicapped."

He has great plans for the seminar. He doesn't want to limit discussion to the individual handicapped person; instead he hopes to explore problem areas in rehabilitative therapy, where he thinks there is a far too impersonal outlook on the part of many individuals and institutions. "It's only a job to most of them," he says. Kenny is also acutely aware of the kind of stress which injuries like his can cause within one's immediate family, and he hopes to bring these to the attention of his students.

During the summer, Ken will be living in Oceanside with his aunt and uncle and five cousins, one of whom, Jill Danis, will be a Human Ecology freshman at Cornell next fall. Kenny plans to take psychology and sociology courses at Hofstra University summer school, which will allow him to carry an easier course load during his upcoming senior year. His brother Steve just graduated from the Boston College Law School and will be working nearby, at the Nassau County Legal Aid office in Mineola. During the summer, Steve will help care for Kenny.

The hope of recovering some control of his body is never far from Kenny's mind. "I'm still convinced that someday I will move again," he affirms, "only now, I must wait much longer than I once thought I would."

The medical diagnosis of his condition remains as pessimistic as ever, but now it doesn't depress him as much as it did at Rusk. "The doctors have been wrong many times before," he says. He is optimistic that medical research will someday develop a way of improving his condition. In the meantime, he is looking into every conceivable idea that might be of some help. His latest interest: acupuncture.

Looking into the future, Kenny sees several problems intensifying. Money is a major one. He realizes that contributions to the Ken Kunken Fund are not likely to grow; he is already aware of the difficulty of finding qualified attendants; and his contacts with people on campus will probably diminish once those who knew him before the accident have left Cornell.

Ever since returning, he has been active in his fraternity, eating Sunday dinner at the house, studying with his brothers and attending parties. But even now there is an isolation which he cannot avoid ("At a party, rather than partying, is what it comes down to"). Now that his pledge class has graduated from Cornell, that gap is apt to widen.

Finding a replacement for Dave is Ken's biggest problem at the moment. Even if an outstanding prospect comes along, it is hard to imagine him doing a better job. Accepting the fact that he will need help well into the future, Ken feels the search for suitable attendants will be his biggest headache. With a note of pessimism, he adds, "I can see it only getting more difficult."

The attendant's costs this year were much lower than they might have been. Dave McMurray received free room and board, plus a salary of seventy dollars a week. In attempting to determine what fees for future attendants might be, Kenny figures that it would cost over \$15,000 a year, not including over-time, to pay a full-time attendant at the minimum wage. And not many people are willing to do this kind of work for just a minimum wage. "Motivation is the important thing," says Dr. Young. "You couldn't begin to pay a person for the kind of job Dave has done."

The financial aspect of Ken's injury has been burdensome. The first four weeks of intensive care at Elmira cost \$12,000, while the Oceanside hospital and Rusk cost almost \$6,000 a month. For the ten months of hospitalization, the total cost was approximately \$66,000.

The expense was met through several different resources. The university paid the \$12,000 cost of intensive care at Elmira. The Sussman Foundation, an independent fund administered by trustee Arthur Dean '19 which aids people at Cornell who have unique financial problems, contributed \$10,000 more. Coach Cullen's Ithaca-based Ken Kunken Fund, which had been growing ever since the injury, also paid \$15,000 of the cost. The remainder, almost \$30,000, was paid by a group accident insurance policy which Ken's father, an insurance salesman, carried with his company.

Unfortunately, this policy was the only insurance coverage Ken had. Even if he had carried the group acci-

dent plan for students, it would have been no help, since athletic injuries are specifically exempted from it. Nor was the athletic department insured for athletic injuries. Instead, such costs were simply paid out of the athletic budget. (Teagle Hall administrative refer to this practice as "self-insurance.")

Until Ken Kunken, however, there had been no demonstrable justification for insuring athletes. The amount spent for their medical treatment each year had always been substantially less than premiums for one year's coverage. After Ken's injury, though, the Board of Trustees decided to join the NCAA group insurance plan which has been in existence for twenty years. The benefit it provides for total disability is \$24,000, with payments beginning six months after the injury.

Now that Kenny is back in school, his costs are not so high as they once were, but they still exist. Educational expenses are covered by the ample financial aid he receives from the university, but he still has medical and personal costs which are not included.

For the most part, these must be covered by the Ken Kunken Fund, which has received about \$40,000 from contributors. After disbursements, the fund now stands at about \$22,000.

Coach Cullen and Bill Fuerst '39, an Ithaca resident who does all the fund's bookkeeping, had hoped this amount could be left virtually intact and allowed to accrue interest, while another fund, the Ken Kunken Medical Fund located in his hometown of Oceanside, could cover all medical costs. Unfortunately, a legal snag has developed.

Meanwhile, the fund in Ithaca goes on paying for both his medical costs, like wheelchair repairs and special inflatable bed cushions, and his non-medical costs like television repairs and a specially constructed desk. Money which Cullen had hoped to save for Kenny's future has now been spent, and his future financial security seems uncertain. Even one extended period of therapy might cost enough to deplete the fund.

When and if the fund is exhausted, Kenny could draw greater support from the State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, but right now he wants to avoid any such government assistance. "My hope is that I will never go on welfare or medicaid," he says.

To help sustain the Ken Kunken Fund, Coach Cullen has suggested that it be officially taken over by the university (the only connection it now has with Cornell is its Teagle Hall mailing address). It could then make its resources available to all Cornell athletes who are suddenly faced with extreme medical expenses. This would allow it to become tax-deductible and might attract more donations than the "small trickle" now coming in.

"People have to be reassured when an accident like this happens," Cullen explains. "We were not able to reassure the Kunkens at all." But with the Ken Kunken Fund available to all students, he feels that a degree of assurance could be provided.

NEVITABLY, one wonders why Ken's case has triggered such a response, while other Cornellians with similar injuries have gone relatively unnoticed. Mark Clemente '73, another 150 football player, was paralyzed from the waist down in a tray sliding accident on Libe Slope, and John Mann '70, an agriculture grad student, is now disabled almost as completely as Ken, after being run over by a hay wagon. Why was there never an outpouring of sympathy for these people?

The difference seems to be that Kenny was wearing a Cornell uniform when he was hurt. He was the symbolic representative of the university on the football field, and his injury was more the result of an occupational hazard than a freak accident. It was witnessed by the entire crowd, and it could not easily be forgotten. Just as the government has a responsibility to care for its soldiers wounded in battle, there is a feeling of concern and responsibility among Cornellians for Ken Kunken. "If I had broken my neck falling off a bar stool," he says, "you never would have heard of me."

The fact that Kenny realizes how much worse things could have been is largely responsible for bringing him as close to normal life as he is now. And it was never more obvious than shortly before he went home for the summer, when we were discussing his condition.

I mentioned that some people had substituted his name for the "man without feet" in the old proverb that begins, "I cried because I had no shoes . . ."

"It's funny you should mention that," Ken replied, "because that's the exact way I feel when I see somebody with brain damage. Someone can always be your arms and legs for you, but the man with brain damage is the man I feel sorry for."

During the twenty months he has been without movement, Kenny has done everything he can to develop the resources of his brain, sense of humor included. One night during the study week in May, he was in good spirits. Classes were over, the weather was warm, and the Rangers had just come from behind to defeat the Bruins and stay in contention for the Stanley Cup.

Kenny was talking about the press coverage he received right after arriving at Rusk. "Newsday was there one day, the Daily News the next, and the Post was due on the third. I was getting tired of always being asked the same questions." Ken and Steve, who resembles him, decided to play a little trick. When the reporters arrived, they would find Steve flat on his back in bed, while Ken would be in a wheel chair behind the curtains.

During the interview it was planned that a physical therapist would enter the room and start giving Steve range of motion exercises. Steve would then suddenly sit up in bed before the startled reporters, thank the therapist, get up and leave the room.

The reporters arrived early, unwittingly ruining the joke, but Kenny did have a name for the caper. Referring to the mid-town Manhattan location of Rusk, he said, "We were going to call it the miracle on 34th Street!"