

'I just want to be one of the crowd'

By FRED YAHN

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ITHACA, N.Y. — As Ken Kunken lay in a hospital bed for 10 months, first at Arnot-Ogden Hospital in Elmira and then in Oceanwide, L.I., and the Rusk Institute in New York City, graduation from Cornell University was a distant pinnacle.

"It was so tough, during those long hours in the hospital," he recalls.

"And the first semester back at Cornell, two years ago, was the hardest."

Kunken, 23, who was paralyzed from the neck down following a freak lightweight football collision here in October 1970, was graduated last month from Cornell University.

The industrial engineering student received his bachelor's diploma just as 3,000 fellow classmates received theirs, as one of the crowd.

His frame of mind seems more positive than ever.

He's looking for a job in his hometown of Oceanside, and he's going to live there this summer. He might be involved with a recreational job, but he's not sure. "I'm checking out a few other things," he said.

He'll return to Cornell next fall, for two years of graduate school in counseling and student administration.

"At first, I thought I wanted to go into the counseling field just to help other handicapped students. But that's not the case anymore. My brother and I talked about it, and we came out with the feeling that it would be much better if I work with handicapped and normal people."

"I'd like to see if I can help others for a change, instead of always being on the receiving end," he said.



THE UNEXPECTANT GRADUATE

... Ken Kunken still in a wheel chair

His physical disability makes an engineering career difficult.

Counseling was a career suggested for him by a psychology professor, James Maas. "I certainly never associated myself with that," Kunken said, "until he put it

to me. But it made a lot of sense. I owe him a lot.

"I'm not going into it because I'm disabled and it's the only thing I can do, but because it's exciting in the first place and also happens to be something I can do.

"... I think I've got a lot more insight since the acci-

dent. Before, there were so many things I took for granted. Physical things, but emotional too. There's been a lot of time to think — though sometimes that's not so good — but, I think that I could put that to work in counseling ..."

Ken's not bitter.

He wants to know what's going on. His mind is sharp as ever, and he has kept up on Cornell happenings.

He suffered a fractured fourth and fifth cervical, paralyzing himself from the neck down, as a result of a tackle he made on a Columbia University player during a kickoff. He has never regained control of his body, but with mechanical gadgetry he can make his left arm operate a button to answer the telephone and also has devices that help him turn the pages of books and to run his wheelchair around the room.

Did he ever have any doubts that he wouldn't graduate?

"Sure ... I had a lot of doubts, especially in the first semester back at school. I remember, I had just gotten out of the hospital and 11 days later, it was back at the grind."

Only this time, Kunken had to cope with the crushing everyday realization that he could not use his body. He was the prisoner of a wheelchair.

"Getting around to classes was one of the most difficult things ... I'm surprised at how few ramps Cornell has going in and out of buildings ... and when it snowed, look out," he said.

His roommate, Bill Ochester, a Cornell graduate from Bellerose, L.I., joked: "This thing (the wheelchair) doesn't really have snow tires."

In addition to transportation, he has had to live with the

frustrating reality of having to have someone do everything for him. But he has handled it well. There's no embarrassment now.

There's a long list of people who have helped Ken overcome his severe handicap.

The main one is probably his coach, Bob Cullen.

He organized the Ken Kunken Fund, which has raised \$40,000 to date. Beyond that there was another \$40,000 raised in the metropolitan New York area (Oceanside Fund), with Columbia University raising \$6,500 of that amount in a benefit.

Medical expenses have dropped considerably since the \$1,600 a week tab while being treated at Rusk Institute, though he still needs one or two daily attendants.

"Ken's physical and mental health were terrific this past year, and his spirits were high," Cullen says. "We don't directly talk about the possibility of walking, with Ken, but he has a lot of hope for the future."

Last summer he spent three weeks in England undergoing acupuncture treatment. The doctor there said the results

were good, but that Ken needed much more treatment. Acupuncture has worked well with some paralyzed patients.

Kunken's grandparents are now trying to get a visa so that he can go to China and have full acupuncture treatment there.

Does he ever think about the chance of physical improvement? "All the time," he said with a brilliant smile. "But though I hope some day there will be a cure, I realize that nothing more medically can be done for me.

He's looking forward to going back to Cornell.

But, he stresses, he's not really dedicated to study; he loves to watch football on television, settling for other sports when the season is over. "People think that just because you're in a wheelchair it's easier to study," he said. "But it's not. I find it harder. I'm always looking for distractions."

Two years ago, in an interview this reporter had during that excruciating first semester back at his campus, Ken said:

"I just want to be one of the crowd, not someone who's different."