

NATALIE SCHRIK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Paul Wicks alphabetizes address labels for mailers at the Christine Linnenbaugh for supervisor campaign office. Wicks, who is legally blind, spends about three days a week as a volunteer at the Linnenbaugh headquarters in Forest Hill.

Wicks: Not Your Cookie-Cutter Suburbanite

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Student Goes Worldwide and Grassroots

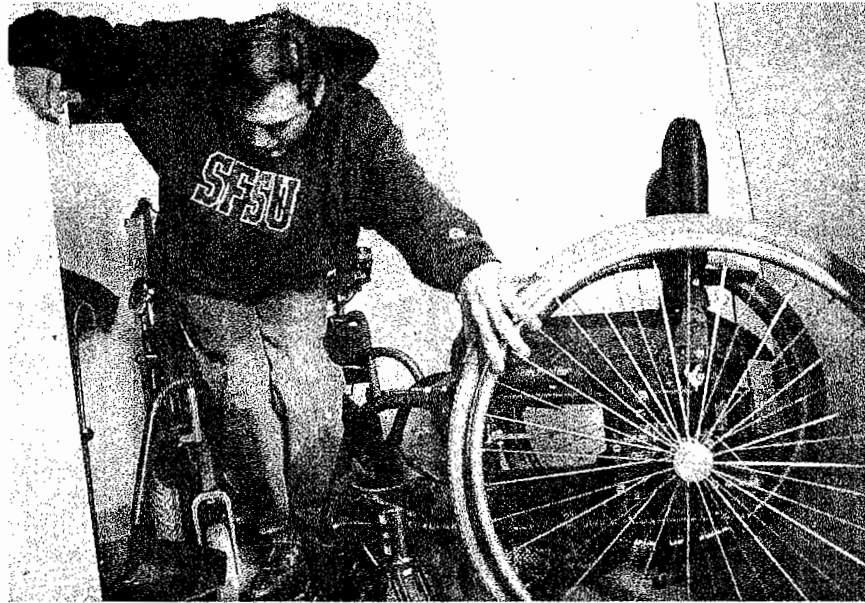
Photos by NATALIE SCHRIK Staff Photographer

Story by MELISSA JOSUE Staff Writer



Paul felt an 'overwhelming sense of peace' when he first entered inside an empty St. John's Unitarian Church 6 months ago. Paul has since attended the church each

PHOTO ESSAY



One of the only times Paul thinks about being in a wheelchair in his day is when he actually gets into it. Every day before leaving his house, he transfers from a house chair to his motorized chair, one that he charges at night.

Paul Wicks, a 23-year-old, a political science major, greets the cashier of Peet's Coffee in West Portal, asks him how he's doing and comments on his busy week, as though they were old friends. He doesn't hesitate to lean forward and move aside the newspapers and chair that stand in his way.

Wicks, who was born with spastic cerebral palsy and a legal form of blindness, performs these everyday tasks from his wheelchair with ease and dexterity.

Spastic cerebral palsy affects muscle tone and coordination, making physical mobility very challenging. But modern technology, accompanied by Wicks' enthusiasm for travel and personal independence, has extended his mobility from The Village at Centennial Square to as far as the United Kingdom.

Wicks said that some people may view his circumstance as some kind of adversity. But for him it's a natural part



Paul takes notes by listening in Lucia Volk's Urban Anthropology class. Paul developed his memory and listening ear, along with pairing up with study notes from classmates.

of his life.

"Having a disability is like having brown hair," he said. "It's something I don't give too much

thought to. I wake up, I grab my chair, and that's as much as I think about my disability."

At home in his apartment, he uses a document scanner called Open Book that works in coordination with an electronic screen reader. So everything from the alternative weeklies to the handouts from class can be read to him from his computer. Below the monitor is a one-handed keyboard with only eight keys that generate the letters of the alphabet with different key combinations.

"People with disabilities can do anything they want to; it's society's prejudices and lack of assertiveness in certain people [that inhibits mobility]," said Wicks.

Even with Wicks' honest and forthcoming nature, some people have reacted insensitively to his disability. He was taking a statistics test last year at American River Community College, and before

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asking the professor to sign a testing accommodation form, the professor cut him off.

"I've dealt with you people before," he told Wicks.

Wicks makes expanding his worldview and social circle a hobby. Between 18 academic units of upper division political science and anthropology classes, he also volunteers at the campaign headquarters of District 7 candidate Christine Linnenbach; attends the United Church of Chris; participates in the SF State Queer Alliance; and serves as the secretary of the newly formed SF State College Democrats, answering emails and typing up minutes.

Wes Mcgaughey, 22, a political science major and the president of the College Democrats, met Wicks when he was searching for club officers.

"Paul is very socially conscious and notable young man," said Mcgaughey, "He's got a funny, interesting personality that most people don't have. Not your cookie-cutter suburbanite."

Allison Sharplin, a 20-year-old

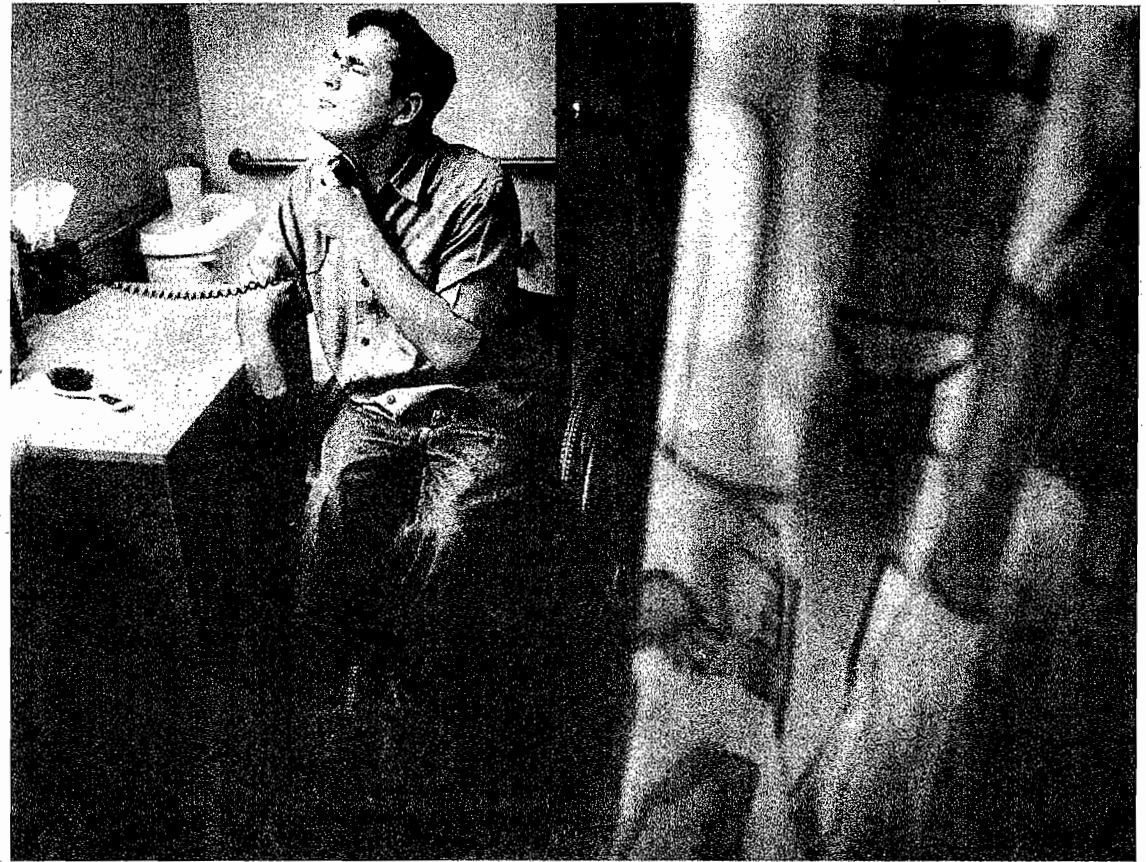
anthropology major at SF State and also the social coordinator for the Queer Alliance, said Wicks is a positive presence at the club and a personal friend.

"He'll be like 'Ally, you're doing a good job,'" said Sharplin as she mentions some of the challenges of organizing social meetings and activities. "Paul is a really wonderful, calm, influence in my life and we need more people like that."

Two weeks ago at a Queer Alliance meeting, they were playing the board game, Cranium and it was Wicks' turn to participate. The whole room fell silent, among a few intermittent giggles, while Wicks began to whistle "American Pie" before his team members tried to guess the tune. Abundant laughter filled the room when someone finally shouted the name of the song.

"The best part of living with a disability is having a perspective that is different from people," said Wicks. "I wouldn't trade my life for anyone else's."

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TOP RIGHT: Paul lives in his ground level apartment on campus with four students. The facilities at his apartment make it functional for basic living, like chair-level countertops, a walk-in shower including a lowered peephole at the front door.

RIGHT: Paul alphabetizes address labels for mailers at the Christine Linnenbaugh for Supervisor campaign office.

FAR RIGHT: "People are less likely to stop and say hello. It's the fear of the whole unknown thing."

Paul meets with friends Allison Sharplin and Christopher Beatty at a Queer Alliance meeting. He understands that his largest disability has nothing to do with being in a chair, but more to do with other people's perceptions of how to interact with him.

