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# Keeping the wheels turning

A recent conference highlighted the ongoing struggle of people with disabilities to gain access and quality of service.

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For a country with so many people with physical disabilities, there is still a long way to go before we can collectively ensure that the disabled enjoy the access and quality of service that are taken for granted by the able-bodied. But progress is constantly being made, and public and official awareness of the needs of the disabled is spreading. Recently, for example, a group of teenagers were instrumental in helping to get appropriate vehicle access and toilet

facilities installed at the new Mamilla shopping mall. But there are still numerous other buildings and public sites that are either impossible or very difficult for the disabled to use. Last week, the Bayit Vagan Guest House hosted the first Independent Living in the Community for People with Disabilities conference, attended by around 200 disabled and able-bodied people from all over the country. The conference featured a keynote address by Dr. Adolf Ratzka, director of the Institute for Independent Living (IIL) in Sweden, and was attended by Dr. Sumi Colligan, who lectures on anthropology and disability studies at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Ratzka and Colligan also found time during their week-long stay to visit The Star of Hope center for disabled women in Ramallah. Colligan is no stranger to these shores, having spent a year at the Hebrew University in the 1970s and making several trips here in the interim. She says she sees improvements being made here, both in terms of legislation and making life easier for the disabled. "When I was here in the summer of 2006," she says, "one of the big issues was whether someone who was disabled could be sent to the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities that took place in August. The Ministry of Finance said there wasn't enough money to send someone with disabilities to the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities - isn't that strange. People got together, especially an organization called Matteh Ma'avak from Tel Aviv, and applied pressure and got the message across that Israel was one of the only countries that wasn't sending a disabled person to the convention. The efforts eventually bore fruit, and wheelchair-bound Henia Schwartz was sent to New York to represent us." Having spent quite a lot of time in Israel, Colligan has also got a handle on the lay of the land in socio-anthropological terms. "I think one of the problems here is people's mentality. Think about public transport, for instance. Are people going to be patient while a disabled person slowly gets on a bus? The way people think about those with disabilities also has to

change." Daniela Brafman knows exactly what Colligan means. Brafman, who is disabled, is director of the Center for Independent Living (CIL) in San Simon and one of the brains behind the conference. "It's not just about accessibility or making things physically more tenable for disabled people," says Brafman. "It's also about how disabled people are perceived. We don't want to be given things out of charity but as equal members of society with special needs." Brafman got her first glimpse of what life could be like for people with disabilities more than 20 years ago as an arts student in Memphis, Tennessee. "I had no idea of the existence of centers for independent living," she recalls. "The movement to get rights for the disabled began in the States in the Seventies, and by the time I got there it was already up and running." Even so, upon her return to Israel Brafman didn't immediately start work on making the CIL in Jerusalem a reality. "It took a while before I really got into that," she says. In fact, the CIL started life in a small office on Rehov Emek Refaim in 2001. "You could fit about four people in there," chuckles Brafman. "But we thought we'd be there for only about six months." Ultimately, it took six years before the CIL became a reality, with the help of a generous contribution from the Zusman family from the States via the Joint Distribution Committee Israel offices. There is also support from the National Insurance Institute, the Jerusalem Municipality, private foundations and the Social Affairs Ministry. "Minister Isaac Herzog is very helpful," Brafman notes, "and we have a good relationship with the ministry." However, that doesn't mean the government is inundating the CIL with shekels. "This year we received NIS 60,000 from the Finance Ministry," says Brafman. "Our total annual budget is NIS 1 million, so that accounts for only a small part of what we need." Despite the ongoing difficulties, Brafman and her colleagues are far from despondent. The center has close ties with a disabled persons organization in east Jerusalem, as well as with the Ramallah center. A representative of the Star of Hope center, Ola Abu

Alghaib, was slated to attend last week's conference, along with four colleagues. However, the entry permits for Israel weren't processed in time. And they weren't ready two days later, when Abu Alghaib had planned to spend some time with Ratzka and Colligan at the center in Jerusalem. "Yes, logistics can sometimes be challenging," says Brafman, "but we are working on getting some joint projects going with the women in Ramallah. We are looking at empowerment projects and training disabled people to live independent lives outside institutions. People who have lived their formative years in institutions find it hard to deal with the realities of life, such as handling finances, when they try to live independently. And it's not just about having accessible accommodation and the help you need. It's also being actively involved in ensuring that people with disabilities are equal members of society," she says. In 2000 the struggle for equality boiled over, and there was a long and hard-fought strike by disabled people from all over the country. "Things came to a head back then, but the situation is improving," says Brafman. "There's a long, long way to go, but we are doing things. That's the most important factor."