

# Woman's determination opens doors for disabled

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It took a debilitating illness to inspire Susan Arena.

Arena, an interior designer and a Jupiter resident, suffered a breakdown of her auto-immune system in October 2005. Until then, getting around was a breeze.

Once she was stricken, it was as if she was battling against hurricane-force winds. At first she was in a wheelchair, then has been able to use a motorized cart to get around when her condition improved.

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Susan Arena, president and founder of E-Quality of Life Foundation, Inc. in Jupiter, is working to get automated door openers, such as this one at The Arc in Lake Park, installed in public buildings in northern Palm Beach County.

She began to realize how difficult it is for those in wheelchairs, or those who use motorized scooters or even crutches, to do one of the most mundane of tasks - opening a door.

"I was in a wheelchair and I'd go into stores, and the doorways would be cluttered," she said. "I couldn't get anywhere.

"I checked the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990) codes and found out no door is required to have one (an automatic opener)."

The ADA, according to a Department of Justice Web site, prohibits discrimination and ensures equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in employment, state and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation.

"Design standards under the ADA do not call for automation of exterior doors, but it's a good idea," said Dave Yanchulis, an accessibility specialist and spokesperson for the United States Access Board, a federal agency in Washington that deals with architectural barrier issues and the ADA. "The General Services Administration has a requirement for its buildings now under construction to have automatic doors.

"We know from our audiences that exterior doors are a common problem if they are not automated. We strongly encourage, especially if they are new construction, that automated doors be installed."

So Arena started contacting politicians, asking how to get the act amended. When she found out it would be easier to act on her own, she went to work.

She founded E-Quality of Life Foundation, Inc. on March 26. Arena and foundation staff have been calling manufacturers and installers, trying to get donations of equipment and installation services. They also began looking for places that needed automated doors.

The first door opener they got went to The Arc vocational school for disabled adults in Lake Park. It was donated by Open Sesame Doors, Inc. of San Leandro, Calif., and was installed by Jerry Otten, the foundation's vice president, on April 16.

When a button outside the door is pushed, a mechanism door pushes the door fully open and eliminates the struggle, or the need for help, for a disabled person.

"Susan has been very helpful to us," said Borislav Guja, the school's lead teacher. "We needed this. We have people who are in wheelchairs and have trouble getting around. This was a fantastic present for us."

A second automated door opener was installed on April 20 at the Maltz Jupiter Theatre.

I was impressed with them," said Tricia Trimble, who works for the Maltz Jupiter Theatre. "As director of development, I'm always going out and seeking donations. Here was someone coming up to us with a donation.

"It'll be a great help to our theater and many of our patrons. We have a row for handicapped seating and a ramp leading up to our doors, but we've never had an automatic door. Having the automatic button will greatly aid our wheelchair patrons." Usually someone had to be available to open the door. This makes it foolproof. Having an automatic door is much more preferable."

Horton Automatics of Corpus Christi, Texas, a division of Overhead Doors Corporation, donated a heavy-duty automated opener to the theater, and Automatic Entrances of Fort Lauderdale did the installation at no charge.

"We were thrilled to receive the contribution because we want to be available to everyone here," said Andrew Kato, the theater's artistic director. "To provide an automatic door to make it more convenient to attend is a nice gift to give to us.

"There was very little for us to do other than say yes, and why wouldn't we?"

The doors aren't just for the permanently disabled. Others, such as a mother with infants in a stroller, or someone on crutches with an injured leg, will get a boost, too.

"Now we're doing a children's program, and people are coming in with their strollers and it's a help to them," Trimble said.

A third installation is planned for Beacon Cove Intermediate School in Jupiter.

"This is not just about people in wheelchairs," Arena said. "It's about freedom for everybody. This is freedom for the mother with three kids and a bag in her hand.

"It's such an easy fix. It's such an easy thing to take care of. It's about the dignity of anybody that's impaired mobility-wise."

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