

## Positive Statement

### Linda Down conquers the New

By RICHARD  
SCAGLIONE

Having a handicap like cerebral palsy isn't all bad for Manhattan resident Linda Down. "You learn how to be different and even become comfortable being different," said the dark-eyed 26-year-old with long dark hair and a quick laugh. "It's like a license to steal. I can do nutty things and people just say, 'She's different'."

Linda's most recent and certainly her most amazing "nutty thing" was to enter herself in the New York Marathon, which she finished in 11 hours and 54 seconds on crutches.

The idea of running in the marathon was not a whim. A little more than a year ago she began an exercise program to lose weight, starting with nine sit-ups a night—no easy feat for a person whose movement from the waist down has been seriously im-

paired. After a couple of months she was doing 100 sit-ups per night. Soon she added stretching exercises and began thinking about running.

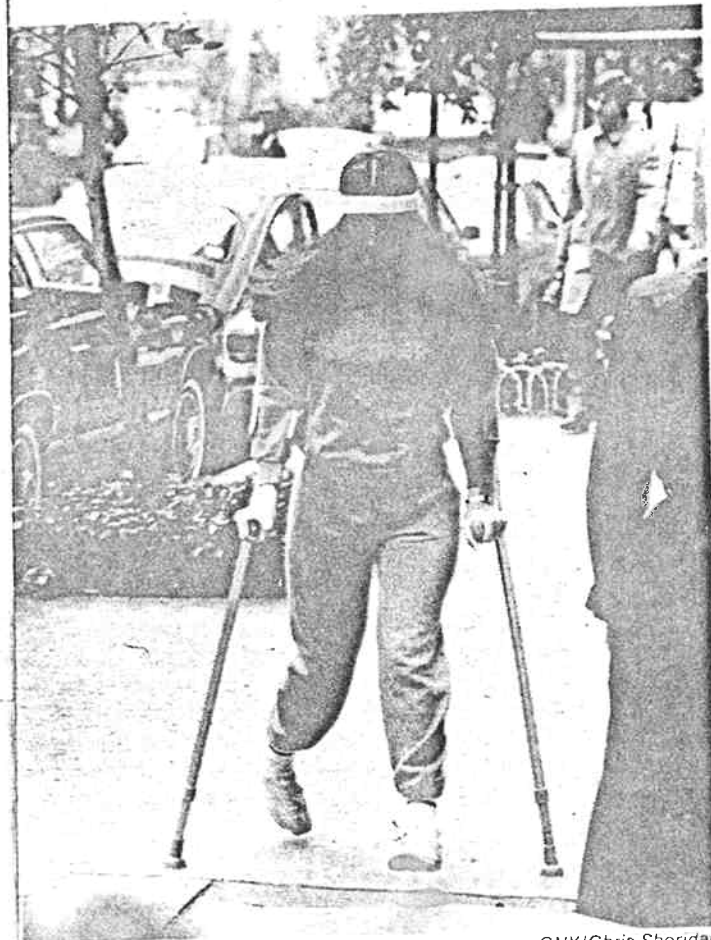
Last May, Linda entered the Leggs Mini-Marathon, a 6.2 mile race, just to "test the waters a little bit." She surprised herself, even though she understandably finished last. "After the race was over I said to myself, 'Gee, I think I could have gone a longer distance,'" Linda remembered.

In August, having completed a research project for the New School of Social Research in Manhattan, Linda was a temporarily-unemployed certified social worker. She used the time to do some free-lance writing and to begin her training for last month's New York Marathon while sharing an apartment with her twin sister, Laura.

The first few miles of the marathon were the toughest for Linda, having to battle 14



"Even if it took until Tuesday, I wasn't going to give up."



CNY/Chris Sheridan

Linda trains near her home on Park Avenue.

against myself. Alberto Salazar had absolutely nothing to worry about.

"I wanted to take my worst asset, my body, and push it to the limit," she continued. "I've always developed my intellect, but never concentrated on my development as an athlete."

The marathon, however, was more than just a race for Linda. "I didn't think I was trying to make a statement just for handicapped people. That would be bigoted, even though it is necessary," said Linda, a member of Our Saviour parish in Manhattan. "I wanted to make a positive statement for people. If I could do this (finish the marathon), then many things are possible. I thought this was impossible.

"Everyone said that I have courage," she continued. "But I think anyone who does something that they had been frightened of is brave." Now that all the excite-

ment is finally cooling down, Linda can get back to writing, which has become almost a full-time occupation for her. She is presently working on an outline for a screenplay as well as short stories and poems. But she is always willing to chat about the marathon with a reporter or interested passerby.

"I think what's missing today is a sense of connection with other human beings," she said. "I don't want to put up a wall and be labeled as a celebrity."

She also plans to keep training and entering mini-marathons and perhaps even the New York Marathon next year. She'll more than likely finish last again, but with a lot of self-satisfaction.

"Once you face up to a handicap, you can dare to do things," said Linda. "I also helps you see beyond the differences of others to the humanity underneath."