

10th Annual Special Shoe Issue

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THE MARATHON!

**How To Be Your Mental
Best on Race Day**

**Coming Back
From a Marathon**

**Linda Down:
She Has the Courage
To Go the Distance**

**Heat or Ice
for Injuries?**

Linda Down is a left-footed runner. Her stride, if you can call it that, begins when she plants both rubber-tipped crutches just ahead of her body. Using the handholds and the support cups underneath her elbows, she leans ahead slightly, lifts her body weight, and drags her left leg forward. It follows a relatively straight path despite the awkward inward-turning ankle and foot that cause the big toe to dig into the road under her left side—*scritch*. Her following right leg describes a longer and more grotesque arc, the foot swinging so far to the outside that it nearly collides with the crutch. The right foot twists more absurdly than the left, and scrapes longer and harder along the surface—*scraaatch*.

Scritch-scraaatch. This is the sound of Linda Down running. Her running shoes require continual repairs, not of the soles but of the big toes, which drag across the asphalt. *Scritch-scraaatch*. It's a sound not unlike the god-awful screech of fingernails on a chalkboard, and Linda Down, too, will give you chills down the spine, though in her case it's not so much the sound that makes you shudder as it is the sight of this slight, spastic lady hobbling along, and the thought that by resolution alone she has completed two marathons, never taking less than eight hours, 45 minutes. *Scritch-scraaatch*.

The 8:45 was the time Linda Down recorded last October in New York, a race she never intended to run, but then, who would have expected her to run that first NYC Marathon in 1982? She still giggles almost uncontrollably when she recalls how impossible the completion of a 26-mile run seemed to her at first.

Down found herself unemployed in mid-1982, having just finished a year of work under a research grant. It was at the worst point of the recession, and she knew she wouldn't easily locate a new job in her field, social work, though she tried. Meanwhile, she decided she ought to begin an exercise program to remove a few of the 145 pounds she carried on her 5-foot-5 frame. The first day she managed nine sit-ups, wondered what the heck she was doing, but kept at it. Always a seeker, she searched for a way to turn exercise into a quest. She thought running might be the answer. Fine, said her doctor, go ahead and give jogging a try. Down failed to mention that she planned to train for and enter the New York City Marathon.

She flat-out didn't know what she was doing, and was too timid to ask. When you've had cerebral palsy from birth and can walk only with great effort, how do you ask someone about marathon training? They'd laugh. Laugh, heck; they'd tell you you were nuts. By the way, what's your best time for the mile?

No, some things are best kept to yourself, even if it does mean making unnecessary mistakes. Figuring that a race of 16,000 must be crowded, Down trained up and down Manhattan's pulsating Fifth Avenue sidewalks. Figuring she had to practice over great distances, she did numerous 16- to 18-mile workouts . . . at about 20 minutes per mile. That adds up to roughly six hours per workout, give or take an hour. You can bet neither Alberto nor Grete ever ran for that long while training for the 1982 marathon.

Besides the constantly worn shoes, the blisters, the sore arms and shoulders, six-hour training days don't allow much time for job interviews. Eventually Down gave up the job search, which meant that she had to rely on her twin sister Laura for financial assistance. This wasn't a decision she reached easily, for Down has nothing if not a sense of responsibility and independence, a pride in supporting herself. "Growing up with cerebral palsy," she says, "you don't have any illusions about Prince Charming coming along to take care of you for the rest of your life. You learn at an early age that you're going to have to provide for yourself."

Laura Down, born with cerebral palsy like her sister, is a televi-

Once you see this
marathoner run, you'll
never forget her. Her
best time for the
event—8:45—is the
least of her concerns,
because she's over-
come a handicap
that for most would be
insurmountable:
cerebral palsy.

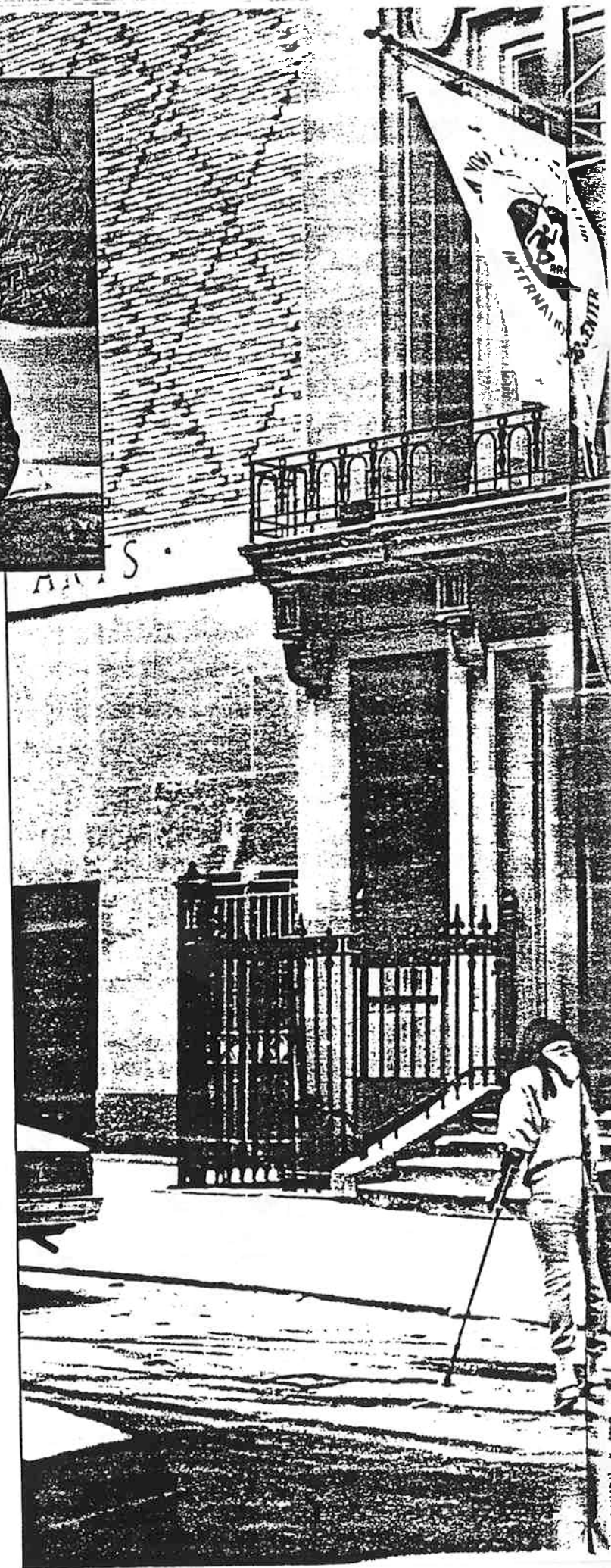
by Amby Burfoot



Bud Lee photography

Above—Linda (right) with her sister Laura, who was also born with cerebral palsy. The running was Laura's idea in 1981, and Linda has kept it up ever since—regardless of the weather.

One of the hardest things Linda ever had to do was ask Laura (left) to support both of them when Linda began training, but, says Laura, "I just figured, fine, why not?" Far right—The Down sisters outside the New York Road Runners Club International Running Center, where Linda is one of the regulars at the Wednesday-night workouts.



sion computer services analyst for Katz Communications, a New York firm that helps TV stations across the country sell advertising time. She was the one who, when the twins were watching the 1981 marathon on TV, said something fateful like, "Gee, maybe we ought to try that next year." Linda beat her to the punch, but Laura was a tower of strength. When Linda asked her to support both of them, Laura thought it was a great idea. "It didn't cause any financial problems," Laura says. "I just figured, fine, why not?"

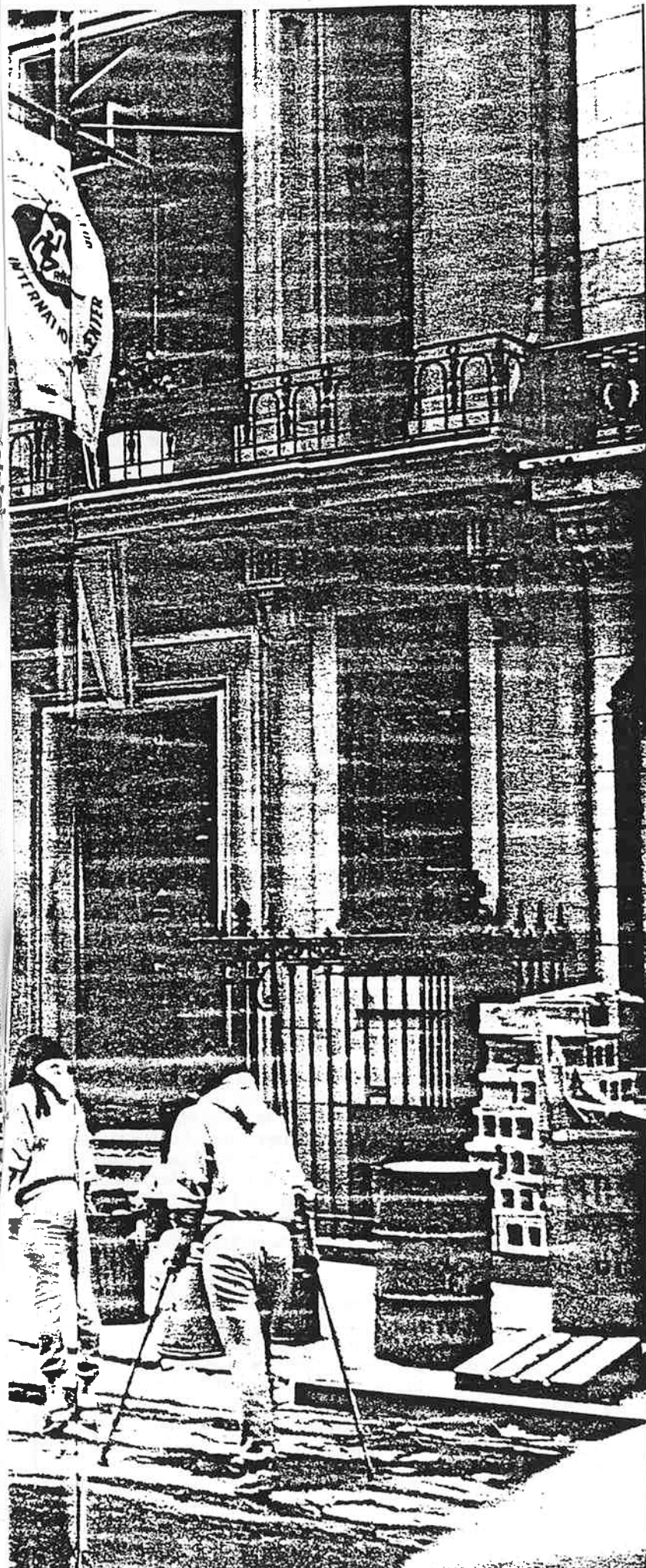
Linda Down, unknown and unknowing (at least concerning the marathon), made it through the 1982 NYC Marathon in 11 hours, 15 minutes, because those 18-mile practice sessions had inured her to long hours on crutches, because her mother and sister encouraged her from an accompanying car for the last half of the race, and because an ABC film crew was moved to rise above its quotidian duties to cheer and assist her, even as it carried her evolving personal struggle to viewers across the country. No one who saw Linda Down that day, whether on the streets of New York or via distant TV signal, failed to feel a slight surging of the soul.

One marathon would have been enough but for the Achilles Track Club, which Down joined shortly thereafter. The excitement of having teammates, new friends and, for the first time, coaching inspired her to continue running. When other Achilles members started training for NYC '83, Down was inevitably drawn to their enthusiasm. This time she trained over shorter distances, but did so more consistently, often accompanied by Dick Traum, the above-the-knee amputee whose early marathoning efforts provided the stimulus for Terry Fox's cross-Canada effort.

On marathon day, Down and Traum started three hours before the cannon, accompanied by a jogging volunteer with a knapsack who served as a sort of moving aid station. "The pack caught us about halfway, and after that I was around other runners the rest of the course," Down says. "And all the cheering people on First Avenue were wonderful. I missed that the first year. They had all left by the time I got there."

Not that the second marathon was better than the first, or vice versa. "I enjoyed them both equally, but in different ways," she says. "I don't like to give value judgments to things just because they're different. The first was more intimate, with only me and my family, the ABC crew and a few people who came back out onto the streets. The second time I had more of a sense of being a runner and belonging with other runners."

With national TV exposure comes celebrity status. Down never expected it, but used it to her advantage. She was invited to give speeches, a prospect that had always terrified her. She accepted anyway—another test, another chance to improve herself. She even found that she liked it. She certainly had something to say, and her



marathon experience provided the perfect metaphor. "I knew if I could finish the marathon," she told a number of groups, "if I could take my body, which I had always considered my worst asset, and put it on the line and have some success with it, then I must have a lot more to offer across the board than I ever thought."

She attended and did promotional work for the Ability Games for disabled children in Miami. "I especially liked the philosophy and the title," she says. "The entire focus was on what the kids *could* do, not what they couldn't do."

The requests rolled in. Down remembers with particular fondness an invitation to visit a fifth grade class in Queens that was actually a batch of students' letters forwarded by the teacher. She was drawn to a letter that said, "Our class is located on the fourth floor, but we think you can make it because you ran 26 miles." She did make it, and was asked the kind of simple, direct and telling questions that children specialize in. They wanted to know whether she was teased a lot as a youngster. "Yes, some," she replied. How did she deal with it? "I cried."

They asked where she got the courage to run 26 miles. This may be Down's favorite topic. "I don't think I'm very brave," she answered. "I was scared to death of running the marathon. But you have to acknowledge your fears and face them, because only then can you do something. Courage isn't what you see and hear on TV. Courage is usually silent. It's when you don't let your fears stop you, like when you're brave enough to make friends with the new kid in class."

Just as her involvement with the Achilles Track Club has motivated Down to continue running and marathoning, she has inspired other club members with her quiet determination and regular attendance at the Wednesday evening workouts at the International Running Center, home of the New York Road Runners Club. That's where Down is headed late one-December afternoon 10 days before Christmas. She is returning from Adelphi University on Long Island when, deep in conversation, she misses her subway transfer station.

She ends up deep in Brooklyn at a station she has never seen before—dark and confusing, and manned by a token collector who sneers unintelligible directions in response to Down's polite questions about getting back to mid-Manhattan. She has to limp up and down several flights of subway stairs, an excruciatingly slow and difficult maneuver, and fight through the rush-hour throng, more frantic than normal because of the Christmas season. Down waits patiently for a strange subway, fights to get on, hoping for a seat, and then squeezes off at the other end. "Well, this is certainly an unexpected challenge," she thinks. "If I ever wind up here again, I'll know what to do."

Traum is leading the pre-workout stretches when Down finally makes her way into the International Running Center at 7:00. Attendance is sparse this evening, as can be expected so close to Christmas. Two wheelchair members are there, along with several amputees and a handful of runners who have what Down calls "invisible handicaps"—hearing deficiencies, brain damage and the like. I ask one smiling runner if he is a volunteer. "No," he tells me, "my whole right side is paralyzed."

Traum instructs the ambulatory runners to break into small groups according to their training paces and to do two laps of the nearby Central Park reservoir. He and another volunteer push the two wheelchair members onto the Central Park roadway, where Traum informs them that they're going to do "speedwork"—600-yard repeats. One of the two women in chairs is young, black, attractive, and carefully made-up, attending her first Achilles meeting and not quite sure what to expect or whether she'll return. The other, middle-aged and quick-witted, is becoming a regular. "But I'm not entering a race until they let me use my motorized chair," she says.

Once on the reservoir pathway, which is pockmarked with puddles after nearly a week of rain, Down relaxes, and soon finds herself alone. The sky, finally clear, is black and filled with stars, and the air is unusually warm and still. All around the reservoir shine the bright lights of Manhattan, a peaceful tableau. Down runs by herself, *scritch-scratch*. Even among the Achilles, she is too slow

for the group, but she doesn't seem to mind. "It's so beautiful here," she says. "It was a real find for me when I was introduced to the reservoir a little while ago. I love looking around at the city lights on a night like this."

Of course, no one ever takes sole possession of the reservoir. Other runners pass Down without a word, squeezing to the left, squeezing to the right, stutter-stepping to avoid the huge puddles. On crutches, however, there is no dodging puddles, no leap-frogging over them. *Scratch-scrataatch*. Splish-splash. Down drags her feet through the water, soaking her canvas shoes but taking no notice of it.

One intent and very fast runner, circling the reservoir in the opposite direction, speeds past Down so close to her crutches that he nearly bowls her over. He comes by three or four times while Down is still struggling to complete her first lap, testimony to the difference in their paces. A short time later, Down confesses, "I have moments when I'm just lumbering along, and someone runs past me so easily that I start feeling angry and frustrated for being trapped in this body that doesn't move and doesn't do what I want it to do."

Linda and Laura Down were born in Brooklyn in 1957, but four years later moved with their parents to Milford, a small upstate New York town. The Downs separated when the twins were 10, but Linda recalls her childhood as a happy time despite family tribulations and the limits imposed by her cerebral palsy. "On the other hand, I've never wanted to go back to being a child again," she admits. "In fact, I've never wanted to turn back any part of my life. I like living as fully as I can in the present and then going on to the next phase."

Linda gives her mother credit for sparking her curiosity—even when the youngster wandered down a perilous path. A long but scarcely visible scar arches alongside Down's right eye, the result of playing with matches when she was four. Linda was always the one to climb up the rickety jungle gym in the park and fall off, and her mother had only to turn her back before her daughter would be splashing out into the forbidden deep end of the pool.

Down's mother, Millie, now remarried and living in Florida, makes it sound as if her daughter is understating the case. She remembers at least two occasions when she had to jump into the pool, fully clothed, to pull Linda out of deep water. When Linda was only 2, her mother had to rescue her from the roof, which Linda had reached by scurrying up a ladder. Millie Down wasn't particularly surprised, then, to learn of her daughter's marathoning ambitions. "She has a pin in her hip," Millie says, "so I just asked her to check with her doctor first. From the first prognosis of cerebral palsy—my attitude was that she should attempt anything she wanted as long as she couldn't hurt herself doing it."

Down always enjoyed school, and considered herself lucky to be enrolled in one that "mainstreamed" her and Laura with all the other kids. She doesn't remember being the star pupil, what with all-too-frequent timeouts for corrective surgery on her hips, knees and feet—she and Laura had to wear elaborate leg braces until they were 11—but the importance of a good education was a family focal point, and she saw learning as an adventure. Besides, it was one of the few things cerebral palsy didn't get in the way of.

The one part of school where this didn't apply, however, was physical education. Insurance regulations prohibited Linda and Laura from participating in most of the activities. These included games and sports they would have had trouble with, but to be denied the opportunity was much harsher than trying and giving up on their own might have been for the Downs. "I could understand why we weren't allowed," Linda says, "but I won't say I didn't feel hurt and resentful."

"I had a terrible time coming to terms with my limitations. You can turn bitter or you can make it a positive thing."

Living with a handicap becomes more difficult as you grow older. The carefree play of childhood gives way to the emotion-laden games of adolescence, which lead into hard-edged life. Down remembers the day she passed over the threshold. The biggest event in her elementary school was basketball—fifth grade against sixth, the boys in their ill-fitting gym shorts, the girls with their short skirts, pompons, and "We're going to win-win-win" cheers. Down looked on from the sidelines and fought back the pain. One of the cheerleaders, spotting her tears, came over to offer an encouraging word. "Don't be sad," she said to Linda. "Maybe you'll be able to join in with us next year."

Down knew the girl's intentions were good, but she also knew cerebral palsy is forever. Still, the memory is a powerful one, of a pivotal and constructive moment in her life. "You come to a point with your disability when you know you're never going to be better," she says. "You grieve—I had a terrible time coming to terms with my limitations. You can turn bitter or you can make it a positive thing, a time to look at what you do have and what you can do. You can make a choice. I decided not to be bitter, because bitterness becomes a burden that you carry around with you. You have to nurture it and feed it instead of turning your attention to the things you do have. I didn't want that burden. I chose to preserve my resources for other things."

Eleven years later, Down graduated

magna cum laude from Pace University and went on to secure a Master's degree in social work from Adelphi. In September of 1983 she became Adelphi's first coordinator of Disabled Students' Services, a 20-hour-a-week job that gives her time to run as well as write. She has finished two screenplays that are currently being considered by producers, one about her running experiences, and the other about the Danish underground during World War II.

At Adelphi Down holds forth in room 309 of the Ruth S. Harley University Center. Her office is tiny, and the drab concrete blocks aren't thick enough to block out the strains of Michael Jackson vibrating up from the student cafeteria two floors below. Aside from her desk, a chair and a teletype machine Down uses for phone communications with deaf students, the room is bare but for a couple of newspaper clippings on the wall: a "Dear Abby" column ("Travel Possible for Disabled") and a Sunday travel section story ("Disabled Learn To Ski"). One of Down's goals is to travel and run marathons in cities around the world.

These days life appears marvelously balanced for Linda Down. After completing her Master's degree, she had planned to pursue a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, but when she applied to eight schools, she was rejected by all of them. Now the Ph.D. seems less important. She's content with her present position and contributions. She can use her academic training and her unique understanding at Adelphi to help disabled students; she can channel her creative energies into her screenplays and other writing projects; the running takes care of her physical needs.

With two marathons under her belt, there's no longer any reason for Down to wonder whether she's capable of negotiating 26 miles on crutches and two dragging feet. She's just beginning to give some thought to pacework. Once finishing was all that mattered, but her 10-K time has dropped to about 14:30 per mile, and she knows she can do better. The running has made her healthier and stronger. "I've lost 30 pounds," she says, "and I can feel that I've gained some leg power. I can actually push off with my legs now. And because of the regular stretching, I have a little less spasticity, though it's still there, and I really have to concentrate when I get fatigued."

The future is uncharted, but Down knows there will be other adventures. She doesn't have to go looking for them. It's her nature and her special talent to discover new challenges at every turn. "If people have learned anything from me," she says, "I hope they've learned to pursue their secret little dreams. So many people say, 'I always wanted to try that,' but they never do. If I can help someone else—not just the disabled, but anyone—to try something new in life, to take the risk he might not have taken..."