

A large, stylized, black letter 'S' that serves as a drop cap for the first word of the article. It is thick and has a slight shadow effect.

eparation anxiety strikes parents of high school seniors every

year, but Susan and Steve Spence of Lewes had to deal with more than their emotions when they packed their twin sons off to the University last August.

Their to-do list included requesting audio textbooks, electronic dorm-room locks, a hand-held showerhead, a voice-recognition computer and a team of physical therapy graduate students to help their son Sumner out of bed in the mornings.

Steve and Sumner Spence, honor grads from Cape Henlopen High School, didn't just tote their favorite posters into Smyth Hall on moving day last August.

While his twin Steve was working as a lifeguard at Cape Henlopen State Park last summer, Sumner, who has cerebral palsy, made seven nontraditional campus visits with his electric wheelchair.

Sumner and his mom traced the paths he'd take to get to classes. They tested automatic doors to be sure they opened long enough to allow passage of his metallic red wheelchair complete with a remote control panel and a Jeep headlight for night classes.

Dave Hauke, the University's electronics locksmith, programmed a dorm-room lock that works on the same principle as a garage-door opener.

Mark Talmo of Facilities Planning, a twin himself, supervised the reconstruction of the bathroom to allow a roll-in shower.

Meanwhile, the Spences and Ken Seaman, who coordinates service learning in the physical therapy department, were anxiously sending e-mails hoping students would come forward willing to work as Sumner's aides. They needed someone to help him get out of bed in the morning and get ready for class and someone to do the reverse at night.

Dana Jenson, a graduate student from Bear, said she'd do it, but Sumner needed more than one aide. More weeks elapsed and still no more help. Steve Spence, who had been optimistic, was pretty scared when August rolled around. Jenson was becoming scared, too. She said when she realized that no other student had responded to Seaman's e-mails, she became unsure whether she could handle the job. Susan Spence interviewed several outside caregivers, but she was uncomfortable with them.



*Sumner Spence and his "angels" (clockwise from far left): Becky O'Neill, Amy Evertz, Sara Shields, Michelle Stack and Dana Jenson. Sumner's twin brother, Steve, is in the foreground.*

wouldn't have felt comfortable with women his age helping him get ready for school, but he was never embarrassed with the grad student team.

"It's was fine because they weren't any closer to my age," he said, prompting mock indignation from the women surrounding him.

"I'm not saying that they're old," he said, "but I wouldn't have people my own age do it."

O'Neill said she quickly found the textbook way to move a patient wasn't the only way. "I'm kind of short and not the most buff person," she said. "So Sumner

## 'Sumner's Angels'

### Physical therapy grad students help UD freshman

The tipping point came when Jenson went to Lewes to meet Sumner and his family.

"They were just very open and very enthusiastic about everything," she said. "You could tell they were just great people."

Jenson convinced four of her friends from the physical therapy graduate program to work with her—Michelle Stack, Amy Evertz, Becky O'Neill and Sara Shields.

One semester later, the Spences call the five grad students "Sumner's Angels." They never missed a visit all semester.

Sumner, who has had more than 4,000 hours of physical therapy in his lifetime, said he

and I just kind of worked it out together. Sumner just laughed, and I thought, "Thank God, he thinks it's funny."

Sumner never missed a class, although he did once knock a person over en route.

Because his aides work only two hours in the morning and one hour at night, Sumner learned to traverse the campus so well that he only bumped into two people all semester. One day his wheelchair went on the blink in Gore Hall and students hustled past him until a 100-pound student escorted Sumner and his 300-pound chair to his destination and called his mom on her cell phone.

The transition from being part of an honors class at a small high school to being a student at a large university hasn't always been a cinch.

"I haven't met many people from my own

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class to hang out with because we're freshmen and it's hard to get used to me as a person and look at me and see that I can do the same things that they can do," Sumner said. "It's hard for them to understand that I can communicate with them, and they can communicate with me. It's mainly seniors that get it. I have two friends in my history class, but they're done in May. I have met a few people in my dorm, and there are some people that I see sometimes and we talk.

"I was surprised how many people tried to help me get through doors but they didn't try to let me get to know them," he said. "I don't know any of the people who opened doors for me because they didn't talk to me."

Steve bristles a bit when his twin doesn't get the same level of attention from students that he does: "People who use 'they' to refer to people with disabilities, it might surprise them that Sumner's not just in class to listen," Steve said. "He can make points that they might want to hear."

The "angels" say Sumner taught them plenty—including football strategy, patience, attitude and courage.

"He just has this great outlook that you can't help but envy," Stack said.

Jenson said Sumner's personality and his knowledge make her look forward to seeing him.

"It has never felt like a chore," she said. "It wasn't hard to get up and come every morning. It was more like something you wanted to do."

For Sumner's twin Steve, the physical therapy students have made the transition to college life smoother. "Initially, when we talked about Sumner and me being roommates, I saw myself having to get him up and take him everywhere. Since there's so much help and we're not generally



*Sumner Spence with his mother and twin brother*

here on the weekends. I really haven't had to do much at all," he said. "Half the time, I don't even wake up when they come."

Seaman said the grad students have a jump start on students who are not helping patients because they are able to apply

what they're learning in class.

"I see the change that takes place in them and the confidence that they build in their abilities," he said.

"I am really pleased that when we moved to a clinical doctoral program last year our curriculum committee had the foresight to add a service learning component. What the 'angels' are doing is a perfect example of how everyone benefits and how much is learned from performing community service," Seaman said.

Susan Spence is thankful for

# ELEMENTS

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food service workers who help Sumner remove his coat in the dining hall and the Americans with Disabilities Act Office employees who record his textbooks, but a smile spreads across her face every time she talks about the relationship Sumner has with the grad students.

"What's so neat about this group of girls is they're so comfortable with Sumner, so caring. They're so interested in Sumner being successful," she said. "It's really a neat opportunity to see how young people can step up and care."

Paul Mettler is an associate professor of physical therapy who met the Spences through a youth lacrosse league and took their request to Seaman.

"It's remarkable that a young man like Sumner has the initiative, courage and support to accomplish this overwhelming task of overcoming his handicap and getting ready for class and getting to class," Mettler said. "He's a remarkable young man, and I'm very pleased that we could have anything at all to do with his progress." ■

KATHY CANAVAN