

ALLAN GOLDSTEIN

# CHALLENGING DIFFERENCES



When 28 first-year students enrolled in Allan Goldstein's Writing Seminar last spring, they didn't expect that wearing eyeglasses that simulated glaucoma or cataracts would be part of the coursework. One might call it an experience of a lifetime—a lifetime of someone living with a disability.

The course is unusual to be sure. It was developed as Goldstein's answer to his students' desire to incorporate outside training as an integral part of the course. "When I first arrived at NYU-Poly, my students expressed an interest in this type of learning," said Goldstein, an instructor in Technology, Culture and Society. "As someone with a sibling who has intellectual and development disabilities, I thought the writing seminar would serve as a great platform to open up the students to a world that is often dismissed by society. The experience could, perhaps, interest the students in developing assistive technology or performing medical research."

Students combined selected readings such as *Children of a Lesser God* and *No Pity*, guest presentations, discussion, onsite interviews and research in an attempt to understand fully what it means to live with a disability and the issues that surround this topic. They also watched videos that depicted

past and present treatment of the disabled. For many in the course like Yinai Fan, the experience was thought-provoking. "My attitude toward people with disabilities changed a lot...now I understand what these people really want is their independence," said Fan.

Many Manhattan-based agencies serving the disabled such as the VA Hospital, Americorps/Self Advocacy Association of New York State (SANYS), the Center for Independence of the Disabled NY, United Cerebral Palsy, Visions and the Evelyn and Walter Redfield AHRC Adult Day Program welcomed Goldstein's request for on-site visits. During those visits, students conducted interviews with the residents and heard firsthand the struggles and the joys they have experienced.

"Before I took this course, I thought that disability could easily destroy a person's life, regardless of his strong will or attitude," wrote Siteng Jin. "Then I saw...examples of people

with disabilities who had wonderful lives."

Goldstein invited a former student of his from JobPath, an agency that provides education and job placement for those with disabilities, to join the class. This autistic student attended all seminar meetings and had his writings critiqued by the NYU-Poly students. He, in turn, provided valuable insight during discussions based on his life's experience. "He completely changed my attitude and eliminated some of my prejudice or misunderstanding of people with autism," wrote Chusen Liang.

While wearing glasses that simulated vision impairments, students traveled in pairs with sighted classmates navigating the streets of the city for three hours. Afterward they wrote about the difficulties they experienced—reading restaurant menus, finding food on a plate, buying a MetroCard. All simple tasks the sighted take for granted, but monumental challenges for a disabled person who wants to live independently.

As Goldstein had hoped, students came away with the desire not only to be better citizens, but to use their NYU-Poly education to improve the lives of the largest minority population in the world. "Now that I know what they want and how they feel...I would do anything I could to help them gain the independence they need and desire," said Napat Ratanakul.

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- Yinai Fan (student)



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