Susana Scheer was an undergraduate at Yale in the early 1980s when she discovered that something wasn’t right. Her friends in the Law School who also had disabilities, revealed to her that they usually wrote papers and studied for exams in small rooms. Of course they would have liked to have used the Law Library, but that was an option. The building didn’t provide access for the disabled. Scheer was stunned and to help resolve this and, thus, her passion to work towards justice for the disabled was born.

Two decades later, she is back on campus, now heading Columbia’s Office of Disability Services, as director. Times have changed, thanks in part to the passing of the American Disabilities Act of 1990, but Scheer believes there is still a great deal of work to be done to ensure that disabled students achieve a multi-faceted college experience. “My goal is to empower them to fully participate, to have the full range of experiences—positive and negative—like the rest of the students here,” says Scheer, “My job is helping them figure out exactly how to do that.”

With more than 600 students registered through the Office of Disability Services, the task is not a simple one, but Scheer insists that students must be allowed to “compete on a level playing field.” The need is especially great because, as she notes, more than 65% of people with disabilities are unemployed for long periods throughout adulthood.

How Scheer helps students depends on their individual needs. She starts with a thorough evaluation to make sure they are working for offices that are most appropriate and effective kinds of assistance. Some students receive extended time on exams, extra tutoring, or note-takers covering certain classes. The majority of the students who come into Scheer’s office suffer from an “invisible” disability. Most have a learning disability, such as dyslexia, or are battling Attention Deficit Disorder. Other students may suffer from chronic illnesses like diabetes, cancer, MS and mental illness. Scheer notes that these conditions “have nothing to do with intellect. They affect how you learn, not your ability to learn.”

But part of the problem, Scheer says, is helping students identify that a disability might be impeding their ability to perform effectively. She notes that a significant number of gifted students with a learning disability go undiagnosed. To raise awareness of this, her office has conducted workshops as part of the student orientation in the fall, and at wellness fairs throughout the academic year. Scheer also reaches out to resident assistants and faculty members to educate them on what symptoms might indicate that a student should be tested for a disability.

Scheer, a Long Island native, has plenty of experience raising awareness and affecting change. After college, she received a fellowship to work in Japan and investigate social policy services there for people with disabilities. Her research, however, only lasted a week because she found so few services available. But came to learn that many disabled people in the country relied on underground grass roots agencies to provide care.

Later, she went to work for the Department of Transportation in New York City as a management analyst. While there, she was able to conceive, plan and implement the city’s first “Access-A-Ride” program, which provides door-to-door transportation for disabled residents in the five boroughs. At the age of 26, she was managing a staff of more than two-dozen and realizing that her skills behind the scenes were her greatest asset.

“I asked myself, ‘Where does one most effectively make change?’” Scheer says, “The advocates create the agenda and force the bureaucracy to put that agenda on their radar screen. But once it’s there, it takes a different set of skills to make it happen. I feel confident translating the ideas of advocates into results.” That confidence has helped her run several non-profit agencies in the city, in addition to working for years in the Public Advocate’s office. Recently, Scheer was named to Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s Human Rights Commission. She and 10 other team members were sworn into the role this fall during a reception at City Hall, and will play an important part in monitoring equal rights for residents in every community throughout the city.

At Columbia, Scheer sees a special opportunity to instill in all students the importance of being respectful of the rights of the disabled and other groups that have been traditionally underrepresented. “This institution has such a far reaching influence on society,” says Scheer. “People who graduate from Columbia are going to be the next group of leaders. It’s vital that we help them focus on an individual’s ability rather than disability.”

Susana Scheer, director of Columbia’s Office of Disability Services, right, talks with James Bigham, a student in the School of General Studies. More than 600 Columbia students are registered with Scheer’s office.