

STYLE & SOUL

QUITE ABLE, THANK YOU

Lauren DeBruicker with Brian Woznicki, a resident of Inglis House who is using eye-tracking software to type on a computer.

Lauren DeBruicker, a law-firm partner and now board chair at Inglis, is bound and determined to change the perception of disability.

By Natalie Pompilio
FOR THE INQUIRER

Lauren DeBruicker knows some people look at her and see her wheelchair first. They see the metal seat as a negative, something holding her back. She's *wheelchair-bound*, as the cliché goes.

That's ridiculous, she said.

"Bound. Like I've been tied to it by pirates or something," DeBruicker scoffed during a recent interview in her office at the city law firm of Duane Morris L.L.P., where she is a partner.

More than 20 years after she lost the use of her legs and some of the movement in her arms, DeBruicker, 41, has a full, rewarding life and she wants other people to know it. She'll spread that mes-

sage as an ambassador for Inglis, the nonprofit that helps people with disabilities live independently while providing 24-hour care to those who desire it.

"There's a perception that people with disabilities don't work, don't play, don't have any fun," she said. "That we're asexual. That we don't go on dates, don't get married, don't have kids."

Last summer, DeBruicker was named chair of Inglis' board of directors, the first in the organization's 137-year history who uses a wheelchair.

"The fact that she's a wheelchair user and lives as a quadriplegic gives her real-world credibility, but she's someone we would want on our board no matter what," said Inglis president See **DEBRUICKER** on C2



DeBruicker grabs the ball and heads for the goal during "murderball" — wheelchair rugby — practice at Carousel House. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

She's a tough attorney, and quite able, thank you

DEBRUICKER from C1 and chief executive officer Gavin Kerr.

"She's an attorney, so she's good at challenging and asking tough questions. ... She's incredibly smart and talented and passionate about the mission."

More than 20 years after the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act, "you're seeing gains by people with disabilities, but there's still a long way to go," said Rebecca Cokley, executive director of the National Council on Disability. "People with disabilities are still struggling to get in the boardroom."

DeBruicker can set a positive example during her leadership stint merely by doing a good job and accomplishing goals, said Cokley, whose agency advises the White House and Congress on disability public policy.

But it shouldn't be that surprising that someone in a wheelchair has emerged as a high-performing leader, said Thea Flaum, president of the Hill Foundation, which operates the website facingdisability.com.

Flaum paraphrased the words of a disabled woman she has worked with: There are a thousand different things that I could once do. I can no longer do about 100 of them. Why concentrate on those rather than the other 900 that I'm still about to do?

DeBruicker, who grew up in Wynnewood and graduated from the Baldwin School, chose Stanford University. The 19-year-old and her father were driving to California so she could start her sophomore year when they got into a car accident. DeBruicker broke her neck, which left her a quadriplegic.

She spent about six months in hospitals and rehabilitation facilities. When she got out, she wanted to return to Stanford. Her entire family — mother, father, 6-year-old brother — went with her.

"They just pulled up stakes and stayed there throughout my college career," she said. "They went through some pretty extreme measures to make

sure that I would continue to have the same opportunities."

The family returned to Philadelphia when DeBruicker enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania law school. After graduation, she settled in Center City, where she lives alone, her family nearby.

DeBruicker knew a little about Inglis when she was growing up. She was familiar with its imposing, castle-like building on Belmont Avenue. She remembers performing there once with her elementary school choir and thinking, "If you are in a wheelchair, this is where you have to live."

More than 30 years later, when Inglis executives reached out and asked DeBruicker to serve on their board, she hesitated. Institutions in general have a bad rep in the disabled community, some with good reason.

Then she learned more about Inglis. Once just a 24-hour care facility, the organization now puts an emphasis on independent living. While about 300 people live in Inglis House and 50 more take part in its day

program, twice that many are taking advantage of the organization's 208 affordable, accessible apartments and its technology labs. Overall, the organization serves about 1,000 people.

As board chair, DeBruicker wants to further Inglis' mission while also raising its profile.

"Making Inglis the go-to resource for people with disabilities and their families would be a real success," she said. "People with disabilities want the same opportunities in life. Inglis can help make those happen."

On a recent Inglis House visit, DeBruicker was introduced to the latest eye-tracking technology. Resident Brian "BJ" Woznicki showed how he need only look at the letters on screen to type an e-mail.

"It knows where you're looking? That's a little scary. I'd be in trouble all the time," DeBruicker joked.

Across the lab, one resident played Zuma, using a pointer held in his mouth to press a mounted mouse. Another used her chin to type an e-mail. The Inglis web-



DeBruicker talks with Dawn Waller, director of the Adapted Technology Program at Inglis House. A car accident left DeBruicker a quadriplegic at 19. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

master, Eliot Spindel, is a quadriplegic who uses voice commands to manage the site.

Dawn Waller, director of Inglis' Adapted Technology Program, said one woman was able to watch her daughter get ready for prom from the Inglis computer room. Another learned how to bank online. "It's become, 'Now I can write my own checks. Now

I have my independence,'" Waller said.

DeBruicker specializes in business litigation. When she appears in a courtroom, she sometimes gets the sense that others are thinking, "Oh, God. They've sent in the junior varsity."

If her opponents underestimate her, all the better for her.

"I'm as tough as the next person. Sooner or later, they figure that out," she said. "Maybe this is one more step toward changing their perceptions of people with disabilities."

But as much as DeBruicker stresses how much she is like anyone else, she acknowledges that her life can be very different. She considers managing her disability akin to running a small business as she juggles the schedules of multiple aides, payroll, and logistics.

"There's a lot of planning ahead," she said. "How do I get somewhere? Can I get in the door? Will there be a bathroom I can use? What's the weather? Which wheelchair do I need?"

"The other guys don't have to worry about this."

Inglis' Kerr, too, noted that DeBruicker needs to work harder than others to lead a "normal" life.

"What she goes through before 7 o'clock in the morning would exhaust most able-bodied people," Kerr said. "She does it with great grace, as so many people

with disabilities do."

DeBruicker initially wasn't interested in playing wheelchair rugby, known as *murderball*. Although she'd been an athlete before her injury — she was captain of both her lacrosse and basketball teams in high school and then joined a lacrosse club in college — she wasn't interested in adaptive sports.

But a friend kept pushing her to try it, swatting down her many excuses: *We have chairs you can use. We have people to help you strap in. We have gloves you can borrow.*

So, four years ago, she tried it for the first time.

"I forgot how much fun it was to chase a ball around," she said. "It's one of the first things that I'm bad at that I actually like."

Now rugby is a regular part of her life, with weekly practices and frequent out-of-town weekend matches. Because of her mobility issues, her primary role is "to get in the way," she jokes.

During a recent practice at Carousel House in Fairmount Park, DeBruicker and her teammates used their arms to power their chairs up and down the court, stopping on a dime.

"I had reached a comfort zone and plateau in terms of what I could do physically, but then you see something that shakes you up," she said. "Now it's 'Can I do that?' Maybe. Try it. Keep pushing. Don't ever stop moving."



DeBruicker reaches to swat the ball away from Benjamin Baker at murderball practice. She resisted adaptive sports at first, but now rugby's a regular part of her life.