

Getting around York University

York's Centre for the Handicapped

By HOWARD KAMAN

On the main floor of the Behavioural Sciences Building, there is a home: a meeting place for York University's growing population of disabled students. The Centre for Handicapped Students is a small room with two offices, and equipment designed to make life easier for the disabled. As unassuming as it looks, it is as vital to York as the students it serves.

The centre was founded in 1978 by Judy Snow, a disabled psychology major. Snow saw the need for a group on campus to provide the assistance and encouragement often required by disabled students. She requested and promptly received a grant from the Atkinson Foundation. Although alone on a shoe-string budget, Snow gave the new establishment enough credibility to receive permanent funding in 1979.

Now 10 years old, the CHS is broadening its horizons and assessing the role that disabled students play. That role has a great deal to do with how accessible we make York — and the world beyond — to those who have a harder time living in it.

Ilana Yuditsky, the Centre's Co-ordinator, described the concept of "accessibility" as one with two aspects. "Generally I think of two things. One is physical accessibility. The other is 'attitudinal.' Talking about physical accessibility, I think York is quite good. The university makes a real, organized effort to make this place physically accessible. The Office of the Provost and the Office of Student Affairs have all worked very hard, and it's a huge job because it means something different to everybody.

"For somebody who's a wheelchair user, it might mean ramps. For somebody who's hearing impaired, it might mean telephone devices for the deaf." From a physical point of view, Yuditsky feels that York rates among the most accessible of all North American universities.

But the university is not perfect. According to Yuditsky, York is 65 per cent accessible.

Upcoming projects for the Centre include campus improvements for disabled students. For example, the Centre is planning to install tactile signs, signs in Braille which would make campus life for the blind easier.

"We'll be starting in Central Square. That's our first project," Yuditsky said. "As money is made available from the university, we'll expand on that. We're also looking into the possibility of getting new types of electrical devices that can assist people with hearing impairments, such as visual alarms." She emphasized that the activities the Centre engages in hinge on the money available.

"The money comes from various sources," explained Yuditsky. "Sometimes Physical Plant will call us up and say that for some reason they've been able to free up \$10,000. Would we like to get some more electric door openers? Sometimes the money is made available by Student Affairs and sometimes the money is given to us by donation."

The money is crucial, because facilities are expensive. "One electric door opener is about \$5,000. A project like the tactile map for Central Square will cost us between \$2,500 and \$3,000. Renovating a washroom is usually between five and ten thousand dollars."

In other words, making the university accessible is an expensive business. But access is not the only reason disabled students attend York.



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The other aspect she speaks of — attitude — is another matter.

"A lot of people talk of barriers to accessibility," she explained. "I think of barriers as prejudice. Not the physical barriers, but the attitudinal ones. I still see people stare at students who are wheelchair users. I still hear people say, 'Well, there are a lot of *handicapped* people here,' which is really not a very enlightened kind of attitude. I mean, there's no such thing as *the handicapped* or *the disabled* — they're students *with* disabilities. Those kinds of attitudes are hard to change. It takes a lot of time."

But Yuditsky feels that those attitudes must change, because there are more disabled students than ever. "Now we have about 90 students with physical disabilities."

Yuditsky attributes the influx of students to several factors. "The high numbers are caused by a combination of a lot of things," she said. "One is de-institutionalization. That is, less and less people with disabilities are being sent into sheltered workshops and segregated settings."

Segregation, as described by Yuditsky's assistant, Karen Swarz, "perpetuates a myth that people with disabilities are not people, that they're a disability, not a person." She said it divides people into two unofficial categories: the "normal" and the disabled.

Yuditsky takes this one step further by explaining that, with segregation, "people who are not disabled, who don't think that they have a disability — very few people don't — have no sense that people with disabilities are out there who like to be part of their environment. We sort of create a 'we/them' environment, which is very dangerous. They are us, and we are them, we're all one."

Yuditsky believes that people treat disabled students as if they *always* need assistance, which, she said, is ridiculous. By becoming integrated with the rest of society, she explained, people with disabilities can work, and have the satisfaction of surviving in our fast-paced world. At the same time, the non-disabled portion of the population can learn to accept them for what they are — independent, equal members of society.

As equal citizens, disabled students must work twice as hard as anybody else to fit in. Often, special accommodations must be made to allow them to survive university life.

York is quite successful in this regard. Automatic door openers, ramps for wheelchairs, and telephone devices for the deaf are among the many facilities that aid the disabled on campus. The CHS has additional equipment such as a computer with its keyboard on an adjustable arm, and a Braille machine.

Yuditsky suggests that perhaps "a lot of people did choose York because it was 'accessible,' for the same reason a lot of students chose, and still choose Carleton — because Carleton is very accessible.

"But," she continued, "you can't really lump all disabled people together. Why do able-bodied people choose a university? Some choose it for a reputation. Some choose it because it has the programme they want. The same thing for people with disabilities. Of course, though, if it's not accessible, they can't go."

The reaction that the Centre has received from disabled and non-disabled students alike, ranges from one extreme to the

other. "Students with disabilities always have varying opinions of Disabled Student Services," Yuditsky said.

"Some really need it, especially in the beginning of their educational career, because it's a support system. Some students, on the other hand, think that it's totally unnecessary. Some students think, 'It's great for those who need it, but I don't.' Non-disabled students tend to have a very positive image of a centre for students with disabilities."

This positive attitude is helping the Centre achieve one of its major goals: a volunteer programme throughout the university.

"The concept of volunteering," explained Swarz, "addresses motivation on the part of able-bodied students. I think that they understand that the concept of volunteering for disabled students is to assist them. I hope they don't see it as a patronizing, or a 'poor you' situation."

Though an association with Camp Muhakid, an off-campus organization for children with multiple disabilities, the Centre created a pamphlet with the "Feels So Good... To Volunteer" slogan to promote the idea that volunteers can make a difference. Through interaction with disabled people, the Centre believes that people can adopt a better understanding of what they're feeling.

However, Yuditsky said, "The feeling I get more and more from people who have disabilities is that it is an experience that does separate them in some way. But what they find annoying or distasteful from our side is that we would look on them as being helpless in some way. That whole pitying syndrome comes from the old medical model that said that disabled people are sick, that it's a disease.

"Sometimes people say to me, 'Gee, how do handicapped people manage?' And I say, 'Well, how do you manage?' That's the pity syndrome which is really dangerous, because I think it shows an underlying prejudice.

Yuditsky compares the frustration of the disabled population to that of black people before the civil rights movement, emphasizing that prejudice is caused mainly by ignorance.

"I do think there is a pretty high level of ignorance regarding disability-related issues — not ignorance of people *per se*," she said.

"They don't say blind people are stupid, but they don't have a lot of knowledge about disability-related issues. I find a lot of people are curious, but they're afraid to ask." Through interaction with disabled students, Yuditsky hopes that this fear will subside and ultimately be replaced with understanding.

"What is very difficult," she explained, "is that those attitudes are part of everyday life. If you don't know any disabled people, how are you actually going to learn about them? It's like saying you want to know about Russian culture without ever having to go to the Soviet Union. You can read about it in books, but you can't really understand unless you go to the Soviet Union. It's impossible."

To increase awareness of disability-related issues, the CHS sponsors a series of events each year, the most recent being a drama production by the Rolling Thunder Theatre Group at Samuel Beckett Theatre. The turnout for the production was low, but Yuditsky emphasized that awareness can only grow, if everybody works towards it.

"I do not think that it's solely the job of the Centre for Disabled Students to be the sole representative, the voice, of disabled issues. It's all our responsibility," she said. "If people with disabilities are really to be fully integrated, to be fully *equal*, we all have to make that leap to understanding, just as we had to make the leap when black people were facing discrimination. People with disabilities are sort of the new coming-out party... they're the issue of the '80s. We're not seeing the full thrust of it yet, but it's coming."



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York is one of the most accessible universities for the disabled.