

# feature

## Disabled students: coping with adversity

Feature by Adam Singer

There are students at the University of Alberta who are always noticed, but not always seen. Most are confined to wheelchairs; some cannot see, some cannot hear. All, in some way, are physically disabled.

Fran Trehearne estimates there are about 60 physically disabled students at the U of A. Trehearne, who works for the Office of Student Affairs, is the liaison between his department and the Disabled Students' Advisory Committee. The committee is entirely composed of disabled students, and was created in November 1977 under directions from Dean of Students Burton Smith. It acts primarily as a source of information and advice for the Office of Student Affairs, and has also published *An Information Handbook for Handicapped Students*. The handbook deals with a broad range of practical information for disabled

opportunity to secure a post-secondary education.

2. Every effort should be made to integrate students with disabilities into the mainstream of college activity. Only when a student cannot succeed through participation in regular classes, exams, activities and services should additional support services be provided.

3. The University of Alberta has at its disposal tremendous resources and facilities which can be of use to the physically disabled, whether students or not. The university has an obligation to place these resources at the disposal of the disabled.

Trehearne commends the U of A, particularly the physical plant, for making most university buildings relatively accessible for students with mobility problems, who form the majority of disabled students here. He is critical, though, of prevailing

and member of the Disabled Students Advisory Committee, Ms. Aabak suffered an illness several years ago which left her with 10% hearing.

"The university is very impersonal; many people don't care about your problems. Once,

as independent as possible. Keeping people in institutions doesn't do anything for anybody. Attitudes must be changed through education at an early age. I hate the term 'handicapped' — everyone has handicaps. A disability is something you can't do anything about."

One of the prime movers in the campaign for disabled students, and a founding member of the Disabled Students Advisory Committee, is Dorothy Heppler. Ms. Heppler, who is working on a Master's Degree in Canadian History, was a childhood polio victim. The disease left her quadriplegic — disabled in her arms and legs.

Ms. Heppler has high praise for the department of Campus Development and the physical plant. She says that, on a scale of 0-9, she would rate the U of A at 7 as far as disabled students are concerned, "and that represents a progression from 2 over a ten-year range. In 1968 the only two buildings I could get into on campus were SUB and the Education Building."

Ms. Heppler still sees plenty of room for improvement, though, ranging from registration to bathrooms. In particular, "housing must somehow be improved — HUB is just not adequate."

She also says she would like to see a greater effort to involve disabled students in regular student life, and notes this requires more active participation from disabled students — "they just cannot sit back anymore."

Clearly, the U of A has come a long way in recent years towards accommodating disabled students, and still has a long way to go. But things are getting better, and the existence of the Disabled Students Advisory Committee is indicative of this improving trend. The situation is perhaps best summed up by a few lines of doggerel from the first page of the information handbook, as follows:

*We ain't where we wanna be ...  
And we ain't where we're gonna be ...  
But thank God we ain't where we was!*



Most of us associate the word *accessible* with politicians on the campaign trail. But for those restricted to wheelchairs, "accessible" describes a building which they can enter and move around in with relatively little difficulty, and today such buildings are so designated by this internationally recognized symbol. Most buildings on the U of A campus are, or have been made, accessible, although some, such as the old Arts building, still pose considerable problems for paraplegics. A few buildings, such as St. Stephen's college, remain totally inaccessible for students with serious mobility problems.

in a freshman psychology class, when I tried to tell the professor about my hearing problem, he just said, "Oh, too bad," and walked away. That just floored me. A freshman recreation instructor was terrified of me, and it took two years for her to get used to me.

"With students it varies a lot. Often people avoid helping me because they are afraid. People act that way because they have their own courses to worry about, and don't have time to be bothered. People are afraid of my hearing problem. Sometimes when you ask someone to repeat what they said, they say 'never mind,' or laugh at you. Sometimes I laugh at my own mistakes.

"The important thing is to make other people look beyond the disability and see the person underneath. But so many people get scared when they see a wheelchair, and disregard the person. The problem with a hearing disability is it's invisible.

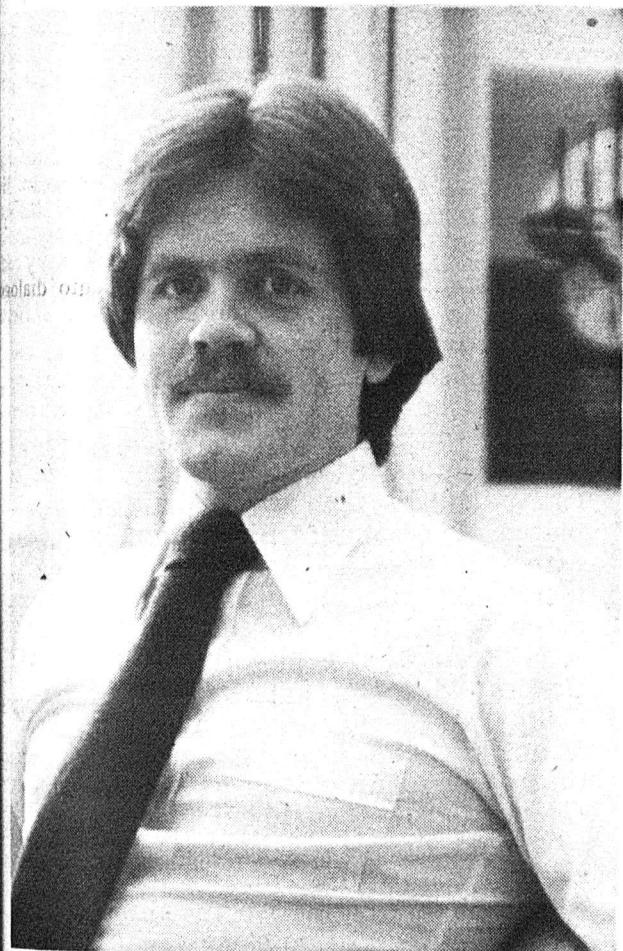
"I'm for the idea of 'mainstreaming' — making disabled people part of society and

## Fifteen points to remember

WHEN YOU MEET A HANDICAPPED PERSON...

1. First of all remember that the person with a handicap is a person. He is like anyone else, except for the special limitations of his handicap.
2. A disability need not be ignored or denied between friends. But until your relationship is that, show friendly interest in him as a person.
3. Be yourself when you meet him.
4. Talk about the same things as you would with anyone else.
5. Help him only when he requests it. When a handicapped person falls he may wish to get up by himself, just as many blind persons prefer to get along without assistance. So offer help but wait for his request before giving it.
6. Be patient. Let the handicapped person set his own pace in walking or talking.
7. Don't be afraid to laugh with him.
8. Don't stop and stare when you see a handicapped person you do not know. He deserves the same courtesy any person should receive.
9. Don't be over-protective or over-solicitous. Don't shower the handicapped person with kindness.
10. Don't ask embarrassing questions. If the handicapped person wants to tell you about his disability he will bring up the subject himself.
11. Don't offer pity or charity. The handicapped person wants to be treated as an equal. He wants a chance to prove himself.
12. Don't separate a disabled person from his wheelchair or crutches unless he asks it. He may want them within reach.
13. When dining with a handicapped person, don't offer help in cutting his food. He will ask you or the waiter if he needs it.
14. Don't make up your mind ahead of time about the handicapped person. You may be surprised at how wrong you are in judging his interests and abilities.
15. Enjoy your friendship with the handicapped person. His philosophy and good humor will give you inspiration.

From a pamphlet by the National Easter Seal Society for Crippled Children and Adults.



Trehearne: no special treatment, just assistance and aid.

...ents, and includes sections on education financing, housing, transportation, health services and recreation, among others.

The aim of the Office of Student Affairs is to integrate disabled students as far as possible into student life at the U of A, according to Trehearne. "We do not want to provide special treatment for handicapped students, but rather to provide any assistance which will help them become part of the student body," he says.

"We expect disabled students to look after themselves as much as possible. It is necessary for human beings to be capable."

The Disabled Students Advisory Committee has formulated a specific philosophy regarding disabled students based on the following principles:

1. Students who are intellectually capable of doing university work should have the

attitudes towards the handicapped: "We have changed the physical aspects of the university, but haven't improved the acceptance of disabled people as people. Deans to caretakers have been uncooperative.

"I don't think people here actually dislike disabled students, but often they don't see them as equally human, and are afraid to offer assistance. In fairness, there have been disabled students who haven't been totally good about accepting assistance, and often are reluctant to ask for help.

"Contrast this with the United States, where the Vietnam war produced thousands of disabled people who consider themselves capable. Disabled people can do more than we think they can do."

Gail Aabak is outspoken in her criticisms of attitudes towards disabled students. A fourth-year recreation student