

## The disabled: It ain't easy here

by Peter Benn

Mark is a critic of U of A elevators. "No two have the same signal layout. I usually end up pushing all the buttons I can find, and then count a floor each time the door opens. On bad days it can take quite a while to get to a class."

He also notices staircases with rails that end on the second-to-last step. And although he knows it isn't so, he treats large and complex university buildings as if they have only one entrance.

Mark is blind.

Kelly used to easily find someone to take notes for her in Classics, where the old professor, who had been all through Greece as a young man, digressed wonderfully from the main points of her lectures. Kelly and her helper would sit together for 15 or 20 minutes after class in the lounge, and she would have a chance to copy the "extra" notes that the professor forgot to put on the board.

But now that the term is winding up she is finding the supplies of fellow students with free time — and kind souls — drying up. And other people she asks sometimes respond with irritation, without consideration for the fact she's deaf.

Mickey doesn't use a wheelchair or crutches, but because of the effects of his multiple sclerosis, he sometimes travels quite slowly. And he can't talk as efficiently as he would like to. All the same, he is an up-and-coming young mechanical engineering student, and he gets annoyed when people treat him like he's "weird".

A meeting of the Disabled Students' Advisory Committee. A strategy session. Up on the rollboard, in big black letters, a target:

**"To be represented in the thoughts of the student body, and student associations in particular when they are planning events or political involvement."**

The Student Affairs Office is run by Fran Trehearne, and has represented the interests of the disabled since its inception two years ago.

When I asked Fran how many disabled students were on campus, he smiled. "I'd say about 45 or 50. You see, there's no real way of telling. There's no rule that says they have to register with us. There were disabled students here before we came and some of them have remained pretty proud of their independence."

He has detected an increase over last year's enrollment, though "perhaps 11 more".

Disabilities are grouped into three broad categories, he explained. "Mobility impairments could mean anything from a limp to a quadriplegic condition. Hearing impairments and visual impairments create their own specific needs".

He commended his corps of part-time volunteers. "We have volunteers helping students go between classes. We have readers, note-takers, and volunteers helping students with chores at home."

"Getting to social events can still some times be a difficult area, but overall, we've had a very good response to our need. We've placed all our regular positions."

Disabled students seem to favour no particular faculties. "They are usually full-time students, but at the three-course level. At one time, funding agencies attempted to funnel them toward non-physical and indoor careers, and careers with many employment opportunities, such as (at that time) Education."

"Now we've got them in Law, in Engineering, in History, in Commerce, in Graduate Studies. . . ."

The first task Student Affairs faced was the establishment of the Disabled Students' Advisory Committee. The office didn't have a clear idea of what the students needed, and they were reluctant to implement programs that might be redundant.

The students' committee came up with a philosophy and specific objectives.

They felt "students who were intellectually capable should have the opportunity" to secure a university education. They felt that the disabled "should be integrated into the mainstream" of college activity wherever possible. And they felt that the university had an obligation "to place its enormous resources at disposal of the disabled, students or not".

The objectives they formulated dealt with coordination, support services, promotion of the students' independence (and the community's acceptance) and the dissemination of information.

Student Affairs now offers a number of specific services for the disabled, including pre-admission planning, orientation, a public awareness programme, a central key repository (many of the service elevators into university buildings are keyed), a liaison with other university departments, both academic and non-academic, and a center for resource materials.

In addition, they collate the services of the many volunteers who read to the blind, take notes for the deaf, and assist a student's movement on campus and around his home.

"There are more of us coming," says Kyle, swinging her chair around to face me. "Our demands are becoming more specific and strident. More and more rehabilitation agencies are looking to universities both as a half-way house on the road back to independence (an "insular" real-life situation) and as the only career training feasible in a situation where the career must be primarily an intellectual one."

And although there are a number of services already available for the disabled, much of their attention is still directed at obstacles they feel could be dealt with more efficiently by the university and society.

The disabled are not included under the Alberta Human Rights Act,



photo Brad Keith

A climb to an exit in Old Arts.

and this irks them, especially when they consider their unemployment rate — around 90 per cent. Accommodation, restaurant, and taxi service is often denied them.

The government explains that education of people's attitudes is what is needed; "human rights can't be legislated".

Kyle inclines her head a degree against the backdrop of her wheelchair's handle, a CAB doorway, students hurrying by: "What's the point of any human rights legislation on the books right now?" she wants to know.

The university has responded to the needs of the disabled, but the students can point to areas where problems still exist.

Many ramps are steep and switchbacked enough to be dangerous. Not all individuals have the same amount of control over a wheelchair.

Doors are sometimes heavy and hard to open from a less than advantageous position.

Many classrooms, such as the tiered V-wing lecture halls, offer minimal provision for students with special needs.

Available entrances and exits, such as in Tory, Chemistry, and Physics, still entail circuitous and time-consuming routes in their use.

Against these complaints must be weighed the special efforts the university already makes. In winter, building supervisors can be phoned to ensure that walks and ramps are clear of snow. The existing walkways and entrances, elevators and services do not go unused. Special academic arrangements are often made for those whose circumstances require them.

Financial help is available; the Vocational Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons programme, public assistance,

This year's Disability Awareness Days presentations will be held in the U of A's CAB foyer, November 26 to 30, from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Each day the displays will focus on a different theme; physical disabilities, mental disabilities, sensory impairments, senior citizens and the emotionally disturbed.

Emphasis will be on making people aware of what a disability means in practical terms. Activities and competitions will be provided in which the public can "assume" a disability, and try to cope with it.

Organizers hope that the university administration and the professional community will benefit from Awareness Days. The disabled want to publicize their desire for the same educational and occupational opportunities as the non-disabled.

The university's Disabled Students' Advisory Committee has reserved the last Awareness Day, Friday, November 30 for their own contribution.

They will be emphasizing what they have in common with every other student; the pressure for grades, the rush for jobs, the compromises students must make between courseloads and deadlines, loneliness, laughter and the need for self-actualization in personal and public life.

A wheelchair basketball game is set for Thursday, November 29, at 7:30 p.m., in the Main Physical Education Gym.



Lunch time in HUB

photo Russ Sampson