

Statistics show that one Canadian in seven is disabled in some way.

Film portrayals of handicapped persons might tend to make us feel that we understand and know all disabled people; we can sit in the comfort of the theatre and complacently assume that because we know what it's like for Jon Voight or Sondra Diamond or John Hurt, that it must be the same for the people we see struggling on the streets every day.

Do we know this for certain? Contact between the able-bodied and disabled person is often avoided because of age old myths and wrongly based assumptions. Our attitudes towards disabled persons pose the biggest barrier to human contact and social integration.

January 19-22 marks the arrival of "Awareness Days - Disabled Students and You" to the University of Alberta Campus. The week long event is sponsored by the Department of Student Affairs and will focus on attitudes towards disabled persons.

Gateway Co-News Editor Greg Harris recently spoke with Marion Nicely, Coordinator of Disabled Students' Services, about the various barriers facing disabled students at the U of A.

Nicely: Last year we did an "Awareness Days" and the idea or the theme was "look at me as a person," and that is sort of going on this year as well. A lot of attention was devoted to the physical barriers at that time, and in the last few years the university has done a lot to correct obvious physical barriers.

Gateway: Like ramps...

Nicely: Like ramps and lowering telephones - they are doing that now. New buildings now have to meet certain

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building specifications and standards.

This office was fortunate enough to have been given funding for my full time position, so people who might not have otherwise looked or known where to go are a little more aware of where they can get help if they need any.

Gateway: When was this position created?
Nicely: At the end of August.

Gateway: Where does the funding come from?

Nicely: Right now it is sort of seed funding from Advanced Education and Manpower, given in the hopes that the university would continue to fund the program. I've dealt with approximately forty students in that time with varying disabilities.

Gateway: How many disabled students are there on campus?

Nicely: There could be up to seventy. It's hard to tell, we don't know.

Gateway: who do we define as disabled?

Nicely: We're talking about students who have physical limitations, or one area not usually thought of - the learning disabled. There are only a very small number of students in university with learning disabilities. The basic physical limitations include mobility impairment, visual impairment and hearing impairment. There are students who are amputees, who have illnesses which will restrict their movement - it's a pretty broad spectrum. I think that one thing that's interesting is that the

Defining the barriers

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International Year of the Disabled really focused on that group of people, and it had to be in order to be effective - but they are so individual even within the disability area. I'm hopeful that "Awareness Days" will point out some of the differences. With a larger understanding of the disability and the limitations, and more importantly the abilities of the people, and what sort of compensations there are - attitudes will hopefully be affected.

Everyone likes to socialize and engage in interaction, but when you have to answer some questions first about the person you are talking to or planning to talk to, it can get in the way. And if you are either embarrassed or shy about asking those questions, then they can be an impediment to meaningful interaction.

Gateway: That is something that everyone has to deal with, I guess, on both sides of the coin.

Nicely: You're right. There are many myths and stereotypes; people assume that because someone has a disability they've gone through a lot and they are probably much more mature. That is probably the case, but they may not have the skills to express that maturity. They may not even be able to initiate any interaction. Certainly what you mentioned is right. It's something that has to come from both the disabled student and the able-bodied student.

Gateway: What are some of the other myths about the disabled... is that the right term to use? The disabled?

has his other senses and that he's capable even though he is blind.

Certainly it is a good idea. There is a chance that he might be lost. But we make the assumption - and we want to do for that person - and that's a very touchy subject. How much should we do, how much should we try to do, or have we had a bad experience when we did try to do something for someone before that keeps us from asking again?

Gateway: Does patronization come in here somewhere? What does it mean to patronize?

Nicely: Yes, that's a good word. We may try to protect a person, treat them as though they were a child because... being in a wheelchair they may be shorter than we are. (laughs) I've noticed at times if I accompany someone who is in a wheelchair to a counter, and perhaps I am speaking and introducing the issue, the person behind the counter may continue talking to me rather than the person in the wheelchair. I guess that because the disabilities have been lumped together for so long we assume that someone who is blind is also deaf and we might go up and yell at them. We assume also that someone in a wheelchair is perhaps also mentally incompetent, or feeble. People's strengths are as varied as able bodied people's.

But I guess that not knowing - the unknown - is the main reason that people have difficulty in coping or in initiating some kind of interaction.

I think that in the university perspective one thing that is important to know is that time is a handicap for a good deal of disabilities. A way to compensate for a disability is often to spend more time at whatever you are doing. A person in a wheelchair may take a longer time getting to class and may also be dependent on the DATS transportation system, and because of the peculiarity of that system, have to adhere to a very strict schedule.

So from that person's point of view, if he wanted to spontaneously react to an invitation or something, he would be limited, and by the same token, someone who is blind or visually impaired may have to spend more time studying, but that does not mean that they don't want to be asked to go out somewhere. They don't mind occasionally missing assignments either.

Gateway: Are there any similarities between sexism which is mostly about attitudes, and attitudes towards disabled people?

Nicely: Yes, I guess in both cases we're dealing with myths which have been cultivated through generations; yes, that is quite a good analogy. I guess when we're talking disabled persons, or women, or minorities, the basis for action is pretty well delineated by them to change the social expectations of those individual groups by showing them what the options of behaviour are to what's being expected.

I think that it is unfortunate that for any group that is trying to assert its equality, that they first have to stand out, they first have to jump up and down in order to fall back and blend in. That's just



the way things get accomplished.

Gateway: There seems to be sort of a knee-jerk reaction among certain people when they come across the radical feminist, or the vocal disabled person, seemingly always demanding "this, that, and the other thing."

Nicely: Yes, and whenever an individual is speaking, they are not only speaking for their peers, but they are speaking a lot from their own experiences, and it's important to sort these out.

I think that our chances at the university to effect integration are perhaps a lot better than at the community at large. It is a lot better here because this is a very interested population. One thing that don't know as far as the effectiveness of a few days, it's always a question of how many people you can reach.

Gateway: I suppose that the other question is that after you have reached them, how long will they remember and maintain some interest and concern.

Nicely: Yes, and also on the part of the disabled community, nobody likes to have the finger pointed at them or say "let's look at him and study him;" but if that is

Here is a schedule of events prepared by Marion Nicely, Coordinator of Services for Disabled Students.

Display Booths

Display booths will be in SUB on Tuesday and Wednesday between 11:00 and 1:30, and in CAB on Thursday and Friday between 11:00 and 1:30.

Participants from the community include: CNIB, Canadian Paraplegic Association, Alberta Rehabilitation Council for the Disabled, Alberta School for the

Deaf, Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, etc. Learn what you can from representatives of these associations: the nature of various disabilities or handicaps; technical aids available; safety measures as they relate to maintaining your health where possible, etc. Some of the booths will invite you to experimental learning. Try to walk with a cane or to guide a blindfolded person. Try on glasses which give you an idea of the perception as affected by various eye disorders. Have you ever

wondered what it is really like to be in a wheelchair?, etc.

Guest Speakers

Guest lecturers will be in Tory Lecture theatre B2 on Thursday between 4:00 and 5:30 p.m.

If someone were asked whether there are disabled students on campus, they would probably say yes on the basis of having seen students in wheelchairs or walking with a white cane. There are other disabilities or handicaps which

slip our notice but those having them would benefit from our knowledge of them. Therefore three HIDDEN DISABILITIES will be discussed by the following special speakers: Learning Disabilities - Evelyn Unger, Evelyn Unger School For Language and Learning.

The Deaf and the Hard of Hearing - Dave Mason, Alberta School for the deaf.

The Visually Impaired - Don Murry, Visual Impaired Unit DECSA.

Fire Safety

Fire Marshall S. Smith speaks on Wednesday in Tory B-45 at 3:30 p.m.

There is a strong possibility of a fire alarm being activated in any building on campus an average of once or twice a year per building.

- what do you do when the fire alarm sounds and you are near someone in a wheelchair on the third floor of Tory?

- What if there is an explosion in your Chemistry Lab and