

Blind: the hardest part is misunderstanding

By Al Bell

A dozen people nearly had heart attacks in a lounge at Osgoode Hall the other day.

This student walked in with a blind guy at his right elbow. Instead of sitting down, the student briskly led the blind guy directly towards a brick wall. At the last split second, he made a sharp left turn and disappeared out the door with the blind guy still in tow.

David Lopofsky cherishes that routine. He's the blind guy and the student leading him is a close friend. The routine provides Lopofsky with a rare opportunity to take advantage of the myths about blindness held by the public. The rest of the time it works in the other direction. Lopofsky labours daily under the well-intentioned cruelties of a misguided public attitude. It's an attitude he would like to see changed.

"First of all, get rid of the pity and the stereotyping you've been taught to feel towards people who are blind," says Lopofsky. "It's not appropriate or even relevant frankly. Realize instead that a blind person is a normal human being,

who, because of their blindness, simply uses other non-visual methods of doing sighted things."

Lopofsky's lifestyle adds impact to his words. As a 20-year-old law student, he attempts an academic program many would hesitate to try with all five senses in high gear. He finds time to work at Osgoode's legal aid clinic; teach in a community school; write for the Osgoode student newspaper; debate in several clubs; and frequently appear as a public speaker on behalf of the visually handicapped.

Amazed? Think that's extraordinary?

"People think any accomplishment by a blind person is an amazing, incredible feat," says Lopofsky. "They say, 'Oh, you're blind, you could never ...' Then they fill in the blank. If I were to be what society thought I was, I'd be a helpless, wasted little sap."

Much of society's attitude undoubtedly derives from the sheer horror of a visual handicap. The loss of a sense so vital to existence conjures up visions of a hell on earth few would care to contemplate. It's from this point that the myths develop.

"There are actually two stages to blindness", explains Lopofsky. "The first stage is going blind. This is naturally a very traumatic, upsetting phase. Now you see, now you don't. The second stage involves being blind. When one adjusts and learns to do the same things in a different way, most of the handicap disappears. But people don't realize there's a second stage. They envision an endless stage, one of tearing out the hair and weeping."

Lopofsky understands the full implications of this point. He was not born blind. He was born with limited partial vision, which did not deteriorate completely until he was 13 years old. He has since replaced his vision with Sonicguide: a pair of glasses which emit an inaudible, high frequency sonar beam within a six meter range. The sound waves strike objects in front of Lopofsky; bounce back to him; and are picked up as audible bleeps in his earplug. Through practice, he can now identify different objects around him by their distinctive bleep.

The logistics of law school are handled easily. Everything is taped: lecture notes by Lopofsky, textbooks by a volunteer, exam

questions by the prof. Like many law students, Lopofsky prefers to type his answers.

Despite his ability to operate with, not despite, his visual handicap, the public attitude, says Lopofsky, "continues to see a blind person as fragile and devastated and leading a miserable life." The myths result in unnecessary, sometimes humorous contacts which, though well-intentioned, often impose upon the dignity of a blind person.

Myth: if you see a blind person walking along, it would be nice of you to guide them.

Not true, according to Lopofsky. Not that it's wrong to offer to help a blind person. The point is, ask: Don't just grab an arm. As Lopofsky puts it, "Allow the person the dignity of choosing whether or not they need your help."

Myth: don't embarrass a blind person by saying words like "look" or "see" or "visualize."

Lopofsky just laughs. "I have to", he says, "when people say to me, 'Um, did you hear that on tv last night?'"

Myth: treat a blind person with cautious respect as their feelings are more likely to be hurt.

Lopofsky recalls an incident involving a heated argument with a friend in a restaurant. The friend eventually yelled at Lopofsky to shut up. Mortified patrons glared at the friend.

"They thought, how dare you say shut up to a blind person. You can't say things like that. You're just supposed to feel sorry for blind people," says Lopofsky.

Myth: the blind constitute a separate, unique category in society.

People who normally rebel at other forms of stereotyping do not hesitate to fit "The Blind" into a uniform social, economic and political class. "In so doing, they deprive every blind person of his individuality", says Lopofsky. "In fact, I have more in common with people I go to school with than people I know who are blind".

This classification of "The Blind" goes much further than a public attitude. It is also an official one. The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) holds virtually an exclusive monopoly in Canada over the affairs of "The Blind." Yet, the CNIB is a private, charitable foundation - a bureaucracy, whose paternalistic hand supplies every service essential to the visually handicapped. As a charity, it receives government grants; but as a private foundation, it is not accountable to those it serves.

Thus, in many ways, the CNIB actually perpetuates the myths about blindness held by the public. The "charitable" nature of its operations lends an official sanction to the stereotype. As Lopofsky puts it, "I don't need the image of a blind beggar". In addition he says, the exclusive authority exercised by CNIB places the visually handicapped in the hands of a private organization over which they have no control.

The solution, says Lopofsky, is for the government to take over the



Gary Hershorn photo

Law student David Lopofsky

CNIB and allow policy input from the visually handicapped. But the solution goes much further than this. Blind people remain one of the few groups not protected by Human Rights legislation in Ontario; The visually handicapped can and are constantly refused housing and jobs because of misguided preconceptions on the part of society.

Lopofsky took a major step in the summer when he co-ordinated the Blindness Law Reform Project: a team of eight Osgoode law students who studied the issue and reported recommendations for change in virtually every area of legislation.

It is the public attitude and the myths about blindness, however, which remain the major obstacle. As Lopofsky comments, "I've adjusted to my blindness very well. It's those who aren't blind that have trouble coping with it".

Remember that, the next time you're rushing to class down a narrow corridor, and suddenly find your way blocked by a log-jam of students slowly plodding along. Above all, don't yell out, "Hey, let's move it up front!" It's possible Davie Lopofsky's friend will bellow back, "I'm trying! But there's this damn blind guy up here and he's slow as hell!!!"

Rally asks Macdonald to fight cuts

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surplus real estate, perhaps using it for low-income housing units as opposed to Cadillac Fairview's University City. Lotteries, he added, could be a potential source of revenue for the university. He concluded by saying that Macdonald must "use his influence on his colleagues to stop the hatchet job being done on our universities".

Isa Bakker, a member of the Carleton University Students' Association and on the executive of the Ontario Federation of Students, brought greetings from both those bodies. She said that the cutbacks in funds to universities amounted to an attack on education and that it was "part of a general attack on social services".

The cutbacks are the "direct result of economic decisions made by politicians" she said, and a "direct result of their mismanagement of the economy. The cutbacks which result strike the people who can least afford it. We must insist that education and social services are fundamental elements of any healthy and democratic society".

Tony Woolfson, president of the GAA, was the last speaker before Macdonald. The GAA was the key organizer of the rally and no-cutbacks week. They will be seriously hit by cutbacks, with as many as 300 of their members being laid off.

"Cutbacks" said Woolfson, "are part of a political reality, and politics can be changed. They say

we're overtrained, but is it really possible to be over-trained for life?"

Woolfson suggested that the "end of the baby boom", a rationale often used to explain the necessity for cuts, was a red herring. "Schools are not lying empty," he said. "They've decided not to fill them with the numbers of students which would get an ideal learning environment, an ideal student-teacher ratio".

He ended by saying that he had "faith in people, a belief in learning and a belief that life can be a labour of love".

Macdonald was the next speaker, and he did not face a friendly audience. Many of the previous speakers' key points had been met with tumultuous applause, sometimes with the entire audience rising to their feet. For the first part of his speech, the audience was quiet. He started off saying that "this meeting was one of the most important ever to occur on the York campus". He said that he had had, in his term as president "a lonely three and a half year vigil trying to get adequate university financing, and I welcome your participation in this vigil".

"I start from the assumption," he said, "that all of us want the same goal; to preserve and enhance the academic quality of life at York".

Macdonald suggested that the university should seek money from outside the government, namely more financing from private individuals to be matched by Wintario.

The reaction to Macdonald's speech was mixed. When pressed to give definite answers whether he would lead or participate in a march on Queen's Park, he declined to give an answer, lest he misrepresent the university's decision-making bodies. He said he would express the sentiment of the meeting to the senate and the Board of Governors.

The first speaker from the floor, caught the mood of the crowd accurately.

"I don't think it's enough to mandate president Macdonald to lead the fight," she said. "I think this symposium should mandate the unions and the student federations to organize across the province and organize a day of protest with a march on Queens Park".

There was loud and prolonged applause to her statement, and the assembly agreed to the suggestion.

The No-Cutbacks Committee is holding a follow-up meeting today at 1 p.m. in Curtis "B". The committee is now open to all interested members of the York community who wish to organize against cutbacks.

News briefs

Mme. Jeanne Sauvé, federal minister of Communications visited York on February 9. Having had a political fill for the day, with the No-Cutbacks rally and Bob Kaplan, MP for York Centre, York contributed an audience of only 50.

Sauvé's main address was National Unity. The questions however were, all but one, about her ministry. She is a very open and frank minister, who seemed interested in explaining her ministry once the questioning began.

Pay-TV, she said was unavoidable, and that although it was not urgent to introduce it, the government should and is considering the issue well in advance of its necessity. Regarding the Satellite industry, she said that Canada has reached the level where it can make exports. Although it cannot build an entire satellite, it is in world competition in the areas of parts and testing.

Andrew Cardozo

Want to drive nail into the cutbacks coffin? Write to your MPP and-or the Minister of Colleges and Universities, the Hon. Harry Parrot, c-o Legislature Building, Queen's Park. Don't just squawk about it, put it on paper, gamble a stamp, and help the York Anti-Cutbacks Committee in their fight to save your education.

Demonstration for Scharansky to be held: The group of 35 who work on behalf of Jews who want to leave

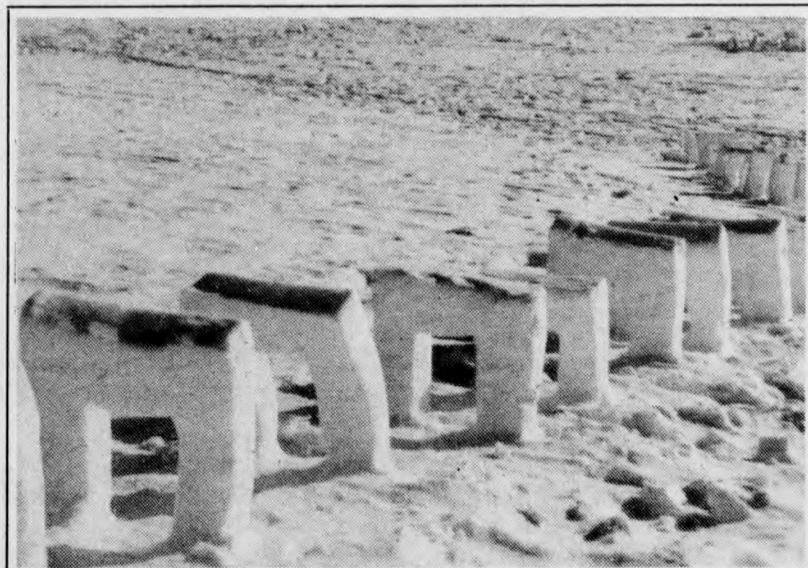
the Soviet Union, will be holding a demonstration for Anatoly Scharansky at 7:45 pm, Feb. 27, in front of Massey Hall. The Moscow Chorale will be performing that evening and the Group has chosen this occasion to demonstrate that any kind of meaningful cultural exchange is impossible unless a basic respect for human rights is present.

Peruvian revolutionary leader Hugo Blanco will speak today in Curtis B at 11 on *Political Repression in Latin America and How to Fight It*, a topic about which, he, through his experiences in the Peruvian highlands, knows a great deal.

An ardent Trotskyist, Blanco's past includes organizing a massive anti-Nixon demonstration in Lima in 1958; working to correct abysmal living conditions among native Peruvian peasants; starting several hospitals, schools and medical aid centers and over 100 unions; and advocating and taking part in massive land seizures by tenant farmers and peasants.

In 1963 he was arrested, ostensibly on charges of murdering a policeman, and was exiled to Chile. He is seen as an example to peasant organizers and land reformists worldwide.

A gathering to support the defence of **human rights in Latin America** will be held Saturday, Feb. 25, at the International Student Center, 33 St. George St. at 7 pm. The meeting is in support of the Hugo Blanco tour, and a donation of \$3.00 is requested.



Chariots of the Gods? What terrestrial force could have placed these strange sculptures between T.O.B. and Ross, and for what purpose?
Bob Ryan photo