

Just a glimpse of what it's like to be handicapped

—The Canadian Champion, Friday, June 15, 1990

I changed. And the people around me changed too.

It was only for an hour. But it was an hour I'll try not to forget. I spent it in a wheelchair.

It's National Access Awareness Week. That means various disabled people have set up simulations to give prominent citizens a glimpse of some of the challenges faced by our frail, elderly and disabled as they go about their daily routines. Politicians, mainly, are involved.

They have been donning fogged glasses and trying to read price tags in various stores. They have strapped weights to their limbs and shuffled through malls. And like me, some spent time in wheelchairs. My partner in this experiment Wednesday was Milton councillor Art Melanson.

We met at Town Hall at 9 a.m. Around 9:15 Marlene Schrock showed up in a disabled transit van — one of those buses with a hydraulic lift to raise and lower wheelchair-bound people to curbs.

Marlene, I discovered, was a youngish woman with piercing, intelligent eyes and a relaxed manner who has been robbed of mobility by multiple sclerosis. Art extended his hand in greeting. Her right arm doesn't function correctly. "I can give you an elbow," she said, and he kind of shook that.

Not a critique

Marlene pointed out twice that the exercise was not intended as a critique of various businesses and institutions in the downtown area. Many of these places "are quite accessible. That's what we're trying to celebrate. Milton has made a lot of very good changes for the disabled."

That may be true, and is particularly accurate at Town Hall, which Art and I are to tour in chairs. But for those confined to wheelchairs, even that building is a struggle.

I should say here that I didn't want to do this. Someone else was supposed to take on the assignment. He wasn't available. Neither was Jane Muller, *The Champion* editor. She too does



Rob Kelly

this kind of thing, indeed had done it once already for another group earlier in the week.

In newspapers there is a division of responsibilities and interests among writers and editors. Jane came up as a community reporter and has always had a social services slant. She wrote a lot about the downtrodden — abused women, elderly residents in precarious situations, and the sick. We used to tease her about "the disease of the week", her efforts to highlight the traumas borne by those suffering some affliction. We all, consciously and subconsciously, handed her these assignments.

A quick spin

I was, and still am, what is known as a "hard news" writer and editor. I deal with politicians, planners, developers, lawyers. I stayed away, mostly, from "softer" social services stories. And to be honest, I had only the most remote concerns for the disabled and their challenges — about the same as you, dear reader, probably have for starving Ethiopians.

I expected to talk to Marlene for five minutes, take a quick spin around Town Hall in a wheelchair and whip off a piece in half an hour — about how it was too bad what some people have to go through and what a good thing it is that folks are trying to change all that. I just wanted to get the damn thing over with because I had a lot of other work to do.

Instead I spent an hour learning that if I sometimes have the right to a bad mood over the small reverses I face in daily life, then disabled people have the right to thunderous rage almost all the time.

One of the first things I noticed was how splendidly fast and graceful able-bodied

people are. And I even felt a tinge of jealousy. As I struggled with cumbersome doors and barked my knuckles in narrow passages, the able bodied moved around me so fluidly, so quickly.

Champion photographer John Warren shot pictures of my struggles. Everywhere I went, puffing and wrestling the reluctant chair, I saw him waiting to set up his next shot. When I trundled off the elevator from the second floor of Town Hall onto the mezzanine, he was standing, relaxed, reading a brochure. He had walked down the stairs.

World had grown

The world had grown larger for me. Distances increased. Obstacles were heightened. Counters and desk tops were barriers. I couldn't see over the counters as well as I wanted. We couldn't comfortably get the chairs under the desks provided for councillors.

It was worse outside. The chair wheels nudge ahead slowly, like a baby's steps. You turn and turn to trundle along the sidewalk. We got on the sidewalk by angling up somebody's driveway slope.

You become terrified of falling when the chair cants or shakes as you pop it over some small sidewalk obstacle or pick up speed on a down grade. "What if I fall out? What if I'm lying on the Goddamned street?" Anxiety battles with fierce pride flaring for self-protection. If I had fallen out and passersby stopped to help I would have had to thank them but wanted to hit them.

The same emotion rose in my office. I eventually made it to *The Champion* in my chair and pushed open the front door, with difficulty.

You feel more relaxed in a building after being out in the street, especially a building you know — even if it isn't wheelchair oriented, and *The Champion* certainly is not. My colleagues, except for John the photographer, are surprised to see what I'm doing.

By this time I am taking the whole thing quite seriously and have a small sense of what

wheelchair life is like. I think about what a fool I've been not to recognize how tough it was before, not to honour the magnificent adaptability and quiet courage that prisoners of these chairs draw on to get them through it all.

John lowers me down two steps by leaning the chair backwards and bumping it down, the way parents do with baby strollers. It is at this point I almost bolt. If he loses his grip my full 234 pounds will crash head and lower back first. We get down safely.

A staffer, seeing me in the chair for the first time, grabs the handles and starts rushing me toward my office. Anger flashes through me. What does she expect me to do, say "wheee" like a child and clap my hands? I'm a man, damn you, I think, not a boy. And my chair isn't a toy. I bark something at her and she stops. "I was only trying to help," she says lamely. It's not true but her feelings are hurt.

The bathrooms at *The Champion* are down a long, narrow flight of stairs from my office. I have no hope of getting their alone. The coffee machine is down there too. So is the advertising department. I would have no chance of working here if the chair was permanent. No chance to write my editorials and cover my local politics and make some small contribution to my community by doing what I have trained to do. No chance.

"Scary, eh?"

A woman walks into my office. I am behind my desk. It is 10:20 a.m. and I have left the ugly, uncomfortable steel chair to return to my work. I couldn't get the thing over to my computer. There wasn't enough room between my desk and a wall.

The woman sits in the chair and then quickly stands up. "I'd rather be dead than sit in one of those," she says.

"That's what you say now," I reply.

"I would," she insists.

Another woman comes in and looks at the chair, then at me. "Scary eh?" she says. Then she looks at the device again and adds, "Yuck, whew." She shudders and leaves.

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