

Is The UPEI Administration Breaking the Law?

By John O'Brien

Author's Note:

I was approached by the staff of the UPEI SUN to begin a series of articles on the barriers encountered by disabled persons at UPEI. I have, to a lesser extent, confronted these barriers myself; not only when I was temporarily disabled - but also when I worked for a PEI business which attempted to provide more adequate transportation for disabled persons on PEI.

I want to thank the PEI Human Rights Commission's secretary, the PEI Council For the Disabled's "Outreach Program" staff, those "disabled" persons (students, lecturers, former students, and members of the general public), as well as those "non-disabled" persons, who have helped me with this article.

I am sure that there is much more I left uncovered, concerning the topic, but it was not possible for me to contact all of the disabled persons (or to find out who they all were) at UPEI. Therefore, I invite letters to the editor of this paper; particularly, to point out things which I have left out.

Question: How many steps are there between the entrance to Duffy and the bottom floor. The answer is six. That's how far you have to lift a wheelchair in order to reach the elevator in Duffy.

For most of us, those steps are insignificant: we might not even notice the fact that the only part of the building, accessible to a person in a wheelchair, is the amphitheatre and that there is no elevator-stopping at that level.

Many stairways at UPEI do not have handrails for those people who require such assistance because of a visible or invisible disability.

There is only one elevator on campus with braille symbols on the control panel: the elevator in Memorial. (It is commendable that we have even one, so let's give recognition where it's due.)

In the light of these (and other) facts, the University of Prince Edward Island continues

to deny access to many Island citizens. The problem is due, in part, to the architectural barriers built into every building on campus - the newest as well as the oldest. Many of these problems can be overcome with a minimal amount of money, time, thought, and labor (eg. the Barn.)

But, shamefully, there is more to the problem of accessibility on campus. Although UPEI is not known for progressive administration thinking, it has maintained over the years, a number of unrealistic attitudinal barriers concerning disabled people - particularly with respect to accessibility. The university administration is not the only problem, when it comes to attitude at UPEI. The student union building (the Barn) can easily be made accessible on the ground floor level. (All it would take is a two foot long ramp, some modifications to the washroom doors, and possibly an adjustment to the height of the water fountains.)

Like the administration the Student's Union (ironically, the union that should be fighting the cause for disabled students) is not ignorant of these necessities, at the Barn; and, so far, has shown no intention to correct it.

The Robertson Library is the only building on campus that is accessible to a person in a wheelchair; however, it too, has some built-in barriers. These include the water fountains (too high), the Student Lounge ramp (too steep), and the doors - including washroom doors (too heavy).

Students, who appreciate aestheticism on campus, are aware of the positive "steps" taken, by the administration, in making Memorial to persons in wheelchairs. We applaud the good intentions of the administration but, had it consulted disabled persons concerned with accessibility, and had it heeded them, it would have built the ramp differently. As it is now, the ramp at Memorial is too steep; the door, at the top, cannot be opened safely (if at all) from a wheelchair, and the brick platform is not built at the same level as the doorsill. Bare

concrete is very slippery in winter and properly built ramp surfaces should have a non-slip surface.

Efforts to make UPEI accessible to everyone have not always been practical (to say nothing of efforts that have not been made, yet). As a result, there are three ramps at UPEI that are too steep: those outside Memorial and Dalton, and the one in the Student's Lounge in the library.

Disabled persons have not always been consulted when architectural plans were being made; and, when they were consulted, they were not always heeded. Does the administration not realize that the "disabled population" is the "market" which "consumes" such "products" as accessibility ramps, and, therefore it is not good "business" when these "products" are not made so that they can be used by disabled persons? (If I may speak the choice language that our "college minded" administration seems to favor.)

Students, who are in wheelchairs, cannot take part in any campus life outside of the classroom or library. (In fact, the classroom has to be in the library - add that to your "registration day blues!" A little extra administration hassled for disabled students!)

The SUN office - (gulp - and CIMN are glaring accessibility problems. Disabled students cannot get to professors offices in Main (or to Student Services), nor can they get to the administration (safely in Kelley) to protest (assuming they wished to assert their rights, according to PEI law).

Like most students, despite some grumbles, I too, make a dash for the cafeteria - when the pain "sets in" - around 4:30 p.m. But if you are in a wheelchair, you are spared the "meatloaf" - you go hungry - or home.

What would the average UPEI student do if he or she couldn't get to even one pub, all year? You guessed it! While your swilling the suds, some people are sitting at home - not by choice! It's the same

story for events at the gym, theatre, rink, or any other part of the UPEI campus, outside of the library.

The PEI Human Rights Act - the only law that takes precedence over all other laws on PEI, states in Part 1, section 2(a): "No person shall discriminate against any individual or class of individuals with respect to enjoyment of accommodation, services and facilities to which members of the public have access." And in section (d) of the preamble, it states: "'discrimination' means discrimination in relation to colour, race, religion, marital status, sex, ethnic or national origin, age, physical disability or political belief..."

Also, Supplement 5 of the National Building Code has been adopted as law on Prince Edward Island. This law sets down basic standards for accessibility (to all persons including disabled persons) to all public buildings. This supplement to the National Building Code has been incorporated into Prince Edward Island law as the "Access to Public Buildings Act." However, unlike the Bill of Rights, this act only applies to buildings constructed or renovated since the act came into force around 1980. One could ask the question, "Does the construction of the planetarium and do the renovations to Memorial fall under the jurisdiction of Supplement 5 and, if so, do both cases meet the specifications?" or "Do Main and Cass deny some people their basic human rights, as specified by Prince Edward Island law, according to the Human Rights Act?"

A committee has been struck at UPEI to look into these questions of accessibility. Next week the SUN plans to meet with representatives of this committee, who, we hope, will provide some answers concerning plans to make UPEI accessible to everyone.

Perhaps the establishment of this committee reflects a growing concern, on the part of administration, with the problems that the disabled encounter on the UPEI campus.