

DISABLED STUDENTS ORGANIZE TO SENSITIZE THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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Press

When Sam Miller began classes at McGill University in 1978, there were no handrails to help disabled students manoeuvre around the campus buildings and Miller said he had to practically crawl to class.

"After that experience, I vowed that I would do something to help the rest of the disabled students. That's why I work for Access McGill," Miller said.

Access McGill is a campus organization aimed at making the university community aware of the needs of the disabled and providing services to disabled students.

Groups like Access McGill are helping the disabled student community to voice their concerns and work together for improved accessibility to post-secondary education at the campus and national levels.

While there are 3 million disabled people in Canada, they are under-represented on university campuses due to the inaccessibility that is inherent in the system. Many campuses create obstacles for students in wheelchairs, class lectures are impossible for hearing-impaired students and libraries are impractical for the visually-impaired. These practical concerns are coupled with the attitude that post-secondary education is not a necessity for the disabled, making education an almost unattainable goal for the disabled.

When disabled students, educators and disabled groups met in Ottawa November 1986, they wanted to identify the issues that concern disabled students and form an organization that could voice and act on these concerns. At this conference, the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) was established as "a national, consumer-controlled, cross-disability organization for and for students with disabilities, to advocate for improved services on college and university campuses."

"NEADS operates on the premise that post-secondary education should be universally accessible for those who want it. So our job is to provide disabled students with information on how to get access and to inform service-providers how to best serve the disabled students," said Frank Smith, NEADS coordinator.

Smith said it is important to note that NEADS is a consumer group, not a rehabilitational service. He points to a working paper on Affirmative Action prepared by Yvonne Peters of the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPHO) which makes the distinction between the two.

"The consumer movement strives to influence the modification of environments, whereas rehabilitationalists concentrate upon adapting the disabled person to fit the existing world," writes Peters.

Smith said campus disabled student groups are part of the consumer movement because they strive to change the university environment and its handicaps, instead of the disabled student.

While the terms "disability" and "handicap" are often used as synonyms, the disabled community would call them antonyms. And it's not just a question of semantics.

The United Nations tries to debunk popular myths

about the disabled by defining a handicap as "an environmental barrier resulting from a lack of supports and/or resources, or from negative attitudes." A disability is the actual physical impairment. This definition attributes inaccessibility to the society and not to the person's impairment.

Disabled student organizations try to sensitize the university community to these distinctions by launching public awareness campaigns. The Disabled Students on Campus at University of Alberta and MOD II, the Memorial University of Newfoundland disabled students group held Wheelchair Awareness days last year. Students, professors and other members of the university community volunteered to spend one day in a wheelchair to make themselves aware of the obstacles faced by the disabled on campus. Access McGill staged an Awareness Week highlighted by a wheelchair basketball game between McGill's basketball team and a disabled team.

While educating the public is important for future improvement, disabled student groups realize that they have to meet the immediate needs of the students.

"Universities can create committees to look at the disabled but while they talk, the students have needs that

have to be met," said Sam Miller.

"Our basic function is to help disabled students cope with life on campus. We help students get to their classes and to the library. Volunteers will read to blind students and take notes for them in class," said Pam Densmore of Memorial's MOD II.

Densmore calls this practical approach "the buddy system" since a disabled student is paired with an able-bodied student. MOD II has operated successfully since 1981 with the participation of able-bodied volunteers but an attempt to start a group aimed specifically at disabled students failed in 1975.

Miller said he values the support of the able-bodied volunteers who work with him at Access McGill.

"I don't believe that you have to be disabled to understand the needs of disabled students," said Miller.

But some campus disabled groups say they suffer from low participation because many students would rather not join an organization that has a stigma of the disabled associated with it.

"By the time I got to the University of Calgary, disabled students were not interested in marking themselves as a disabled group," said Patricia Demiantschuk, the past president of the disabled student association.

Sam Miller sees the same thing happening at McGill.

"Disabled student groups are dying out because of the stigma associated with the disabled. It's really hard to get members because students think all they share is their disabilities," said Miller.

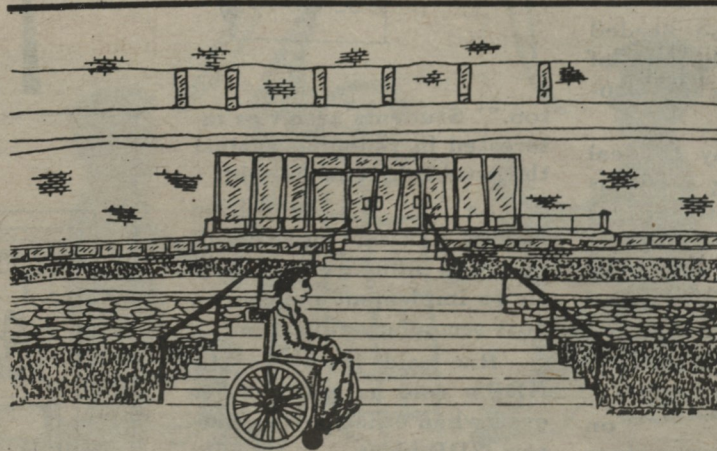
Miller said that Access McGill would probably dissolve if he left because so few people are still interested in maintaining a disabled group. Demiantschuk said the University of Calgary group has been temporarily folded because she could not get disabled students to attend meetings and participate in the group.

Demiantschuk attributes most of the apparent apathy to the disabled students' desire to integrate themselves into the general university community.

"A lot of disabled students have been taught to want to blend into the community so now it is uncomfortable for them to stand out," said Demiantschuk.

But when disabled students are organized, they can often lobby the university administration to improve accessibility within in the university community. MOD II has worked with the Memorial administration to recommend improvements and the two groups have just completed a guide for disabled students that details accessible parking areas, elevators, cafeterias, lounges and study areas and services like MOD II and on-campus transportation.

Miller said Access McGill tries to make the administration aware of the needs of the disabled on campus but McGill's 30 million deficit makes it impossible for it to spend money on accessibility. Although the university adopted a policy statement on the provision of disabled services in January 1986, the dire funding situation means that the disabled won't get the special equipment they need.



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