

In the Stream

Spring 2004

Getting Disability Back on the Media Table

by Don Barrie

On February 5, 2004, CILT posted news of a landmark decision that could greatly benefit the Independent Living movement in Canada.

Consumers across the country achieved a major victory on January 21, when the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) passed a ruling that requires broadcasters to make disability more visible across the board in the media. Under this ruling, broadcasters are now expected to work harder to present more positive images of consumers with disabilities. It's an opportunity for the IL movement to raise its profile, and how it can play a significant impact in the lives of all Canadians with disabilities. It also promises to give greater opportunities for aspiring filmmakers, journalists, writers and actors with disabilities to get their stories told to a wider audience.

This ruling is part of a campaign spearheaded by one of our colleagues and CILT members to get television broadcasters to include Canadians with disabilities in its national agenda, both in front of and behind the camera.

After years of frustration watching disability stories get distorted, misconstrued, underdeveloped, or, in most cases, ignored, a consumer and filmmaker named Don Peuramaki decided that something needed to be done. He began researching and drafting a formal case in 2002, and took his campaign to the CRTC.

In May 2003, he made his argument to the CRTC in the form of an intervention, in hopes that it would lead to action when licenses for a group of specialty TV networks came up for renewal.

"Very little was being done to include disability," Peuramaki says. "Most films and programs that claim to have a disability theme are told, to this day, from a non-disabled person's point of view, and very seldom reflect the perspectives, concerns and interests of consumers (with disabilities)."

This ruling may have only been passed recently, but the IL community had sewn its seeds many years earlier. In 1986, CILT hired Peuramaki to produce disability-positive programming that would get heard on public radio. The initial collaboration resulted in a weekly half-hour show called "The Radio Connection," and was broadcast on the University of Toronto's station CIUT 89.5 FM. The show featured disability news, community event announcements and interviews

with consumers and disability allies. The radio show eventually morphed into the TV series the Disability Network (D-Net), after receiving financial support from Metro Toronto, the Federal Secretary of State (now known as Human Resources Development Canada) and the CBC. D-Net became the first all-disability news program on TV, and was picked up by CBC Television affiliates across Canada.

It was during this period that a Parliamentary Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons released a report titled, "No News is Bad News." The report, addressed to the House of Commons in 1988, included 27 major recommendations. The Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) expressed an offer through the report to "work out the means of a co-operative effort to address the problems of the social stigma and frustrations of disabled persons," and a commitment to develop "a broadcast industry standard for the portrayal of disabled persons" (First Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons. "No News is Bad News." House of Commons: August 1988, p. 67-68).

But very few of the recommendations were implemented to enforce programming that would further the equitable and accurate portrayal of people with disabilities. The report's disability agenda, according to Peuramaki, appeared to have "fallen off the table" by the late 1990s.

It became apparent that disability had fallen off the diversity agenda for other agencies of Heritage Canada's portfolio when Peuramaki attended the Minister's Forum on Diversity and Culture in Ottawa last April. It was there that Sheila Copps, the Heritage Minister at the time, and Jean Augustine, acknowledged that people with disabilities should be recognized in the Ministry's policy and programming agenda. Member agencies of Heritage include Telefilm Canada, CBC, the National Film Board of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts and the CRTC.

During a Heritage meeting held in Toronto on March 7, 2003, one of the points acknowledged is that, "People with disabilities have the farthest to go in terms of inclusion in mainstream culture. An important distinction must be made between art about them, and art by them: there is a lot of the former and not enough of the latter" (Minister's Forum on Diversity and Culture Program Guide, p. 19).

The CRTC ruling, Broadcasting Public Notice CRTC 2004-2, makes several references to people with disabilities, but the key clauses are in 50-53:

Community involvement

50.

The plan should describe the mechanisms that the licensee will put in place to ensure that it receives effective input and feedback from its viewers, and from the

public at large, with respect to the reflection of cultural diversity, including Aboriginal cultures, in its programming.

Reflection of persons with disabilities

51.

Don Peuramaki of Fireweed Productions Inc. and the National Federation of the Blind: Advocates for Equality (NFB:AE) both filed interventions expressing their particular concern about the lack of reflection and portrayal provided by broadcasters of persons with disabilities. Mr. Peuramaki stated that "People with disabilities should not be 'out of sight' nor 'out of mind' in this critical industry which shapes the perception of ourselves as a nation." According to the NFB:AE, "True-to-life portrayals would serve the valuable purpose of public education by showing the abilities of people who have a disability." The CAB indicated in its appearance at the hearing that the reflection of persons with disabilities is on its agenda and that the CAB's Joint Social Issues Committee would investigate the issue.

52.

The Commission considers that the presence, portrayal and participation of persons with disabilities is an important matter, one that is very much in need of thorough investigation by the broadcasting industry. The Commission notes in particular the role that broadcasters can play in helping create and reinforce positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities. It therefore calls upon the CAB to develop and file a plan, within six months of today's date, outlining the process it would propose be followed to examine issues surrounding the presence, portrayal and participation of persons with disabilities in television programming. In the meantime, the Commission expects all specialty service licensees to take steps to ensure that members of all four designated groups receive fair on-air representation and, in particular, to redress the obvious absence of persons having disabilities in on-air positions.

53.

The Commission notes that some broadcasters have already expanded their definition of diversity to include persons with disabilities. Indeed, the Commission considers that initiatives to make programming more reflective and inclusive of Canada's cultural diversity can, in many cases, be extended or adapted to ensure fair, balanced and inclusive reflection and representation of persons with disabilities. Accordingly, the Commission calls upon these and all other broadcasters to incorporate persons with disabilities into their cultural diversity corporate planning. This should be reflected in the annual reports on cultural diversity filed by broadcasters, beginning with that due to be filed in December

2004.

Many of us at CILT consider the ruling long overdue, and believe that it will strengthen the IL movement. Peuramaki, however, reacts with cautious optimism.

"It *could* be a boon to the IL movement," he says, "but in order for this ruling to be effective, people in the IL movement have to take charge and plant the seeds of fresh ideas. If you try to plant the seeds in the desert, nothing will happen. But this ruling has helped to till the soil."

Peuramaki's advice to filmmakers and consumers in the IL movement: don't rely on outsiders to get your stories told. "I can almost guarantee that they'll get it wrong somehow."

He also suggests that the IL movement can empower itself further by "evaluating the quality of the work before it gets released if that's possible" and afterwards." Most other minority groups have active media watch campaigns. (Incidentally, this was one of the other recommendations of "No News is Bad News.")

It may take a while longer before all the media obstacles are removed, but under the CRTC ruling, broadcasters will now be motivated to at least look at proposals from consumers with disabilities who want to tell their stories on film.

"If you have talent, an interest in broadcasting and have been reluctant to consider the industry seriously because of the potential barriers, this may be a good time to reconsider," Peuramaki says. Writers, producers, and actors who have disabilities and an independent living background (with a knowledge of the disability movement) now have the potential to make vast improvements in the quality of reporting and storytelling in mainstream media.

"Consumers can play a role by writing to the CRTC the next time distorted views of people with disabilities are presented to the general public, because it is a complaints-driven organization like the Human Rights Commission," he adds.

Peuramaki worked hard to get his argument heard before the CRTC, and other consumers and disability allies supported his cause, including those at CILT, CAILC and ERDCO. He also received support from Fireweed Media Productions (successors to the Disability Network), other independent filmmakers and diversity advocates, and The Weather Network and its French-language counterpart, Météomedia.

"It's great to see it pass through. This is just the start, there's still more work to be done," Peuramaki says.

One of the next steps, according to Peuramaki, is to change the Broadcast Act to

include an explicit reference to people with disabilities similar to the Employment Equity Act. This, along with the CRTC ruling, would pave the way for an increase in disability programming on mainstream TV and radio.

Peuramaki's proposal to the CRTC also received attention and recognition from the mainstream media. Andrew Cardozo, a public policy analyst and CRTC commissioner from October 1997 to October 2003, wrote about the CRTC intervention in a Toronto Star article published on February 3 ("Disabled Finally Making Inroads in Television"). The conclusions made by Cardozo are shared by the IL community, and are best captured in these words:

"Some of the credit obviously goes to the CRTC. But most of the kudos belongs to Peuramaki who demonstrated that one person could take on the federal regulator and the broadcasting industry and get them on side."

Congratulations, Don Peuramaki!

Don Barrie wishes to thank Don Peuramaki and Bill McQueen of Fireweed Media Productions for lending their contributions to this article. - Ed.

A Recap of the ODA Consultation on Improving Access for Students with Disabilities

by Don Barrie

A consultation on the Ontarians with Disabilities Act was broadcast live on the Internet on Wednesday, March 10, 2004 - the first Webcast ever hosted by the Ontario government. The consultation was presided by Ryerson University Disability Studies professor Catherine Frazee, and Dr. Kuldip Kular, Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Citizenship & Immigration (Dr. Marie Bountrogianni).

The discussion focused on how the ODA could improve access for students with disabilities. The featured panelists for this discussion were from Toronto, Peterborough, Ottawa, Sudbury, Thunder Bay and Kitchener. (This group included a former ODA Committee member, and the former Direct Funding coordinator for the Thunder Bay ILRC.)

During the consultation, the panelists raised the following issues:

- the tuition costs for a person with a disability are too high, and need to be further subsidized
- the recent implementation of grade 10 literacy tests are exclusionary to consumers who have learning disabilities
- a system needs to be created so deaf students can have access to sign language and related communication devices

- a public school system is needed that would allow deaf consumers to communicate with faculty in English and/or French; it would allow for an easier transition from secondary to post-secondary education for deaf consumers
- the need for disability departments at schools to be better developed and responsive to the concerns of students with disabilities
- there are not enough hiring and contracting opportunities for students who are disabled
- the ODA lacks an all-encompassing definition of "barriers"
- methods need to be in place to reduce attitudinal barriers to education, as well as employment barriers
- accessing living allowance with ODSP often clashes with OSAP guidelines, as many students with disabilities are forced to pay back both the loan and ODSP
- consumers should be allowed to provide confidential info about their disabilities to their instructors when seeking accommodations

A question period followed the panel discussion. Several emails were sent to the panelists in response to their criticisms, ideas and suggestions. The question period began when the panelists responded to the concerns regarding difficulties of transition to or from post-secondary education to the professional level. This ensued a debate between the pros and cons of self-identification (i.e. disclosing your disability to faculty and school staff).

In response to other questions raised, the panelists revealed that:

- universities need to make its disability services more widely available to secondary schools
- secondary and post-secondary schools lack understanding of academic and career opportunities for students with disabilities
- more disabled role models are needed for mentoring programs at secondary schools
- a \$2500 bursary is available to some students with disabilities receiving ODSP, but it is seldom promoted
- a transition to post-secondary school to work could include mentoring initiatives and subsidies
- students with disabilities who are blind need better access to audio books needed for consumers who are blind (e.g. the University of Toronto doesn't make its textbook lists available until the 3rd week of August, and this doesn't provide enough time for students who are blind to prepare for the academic year)

At the end of the Webcast, Catherine Frazee summarized the following conclusions:

- students need to have information at the earliest stages (e.g.

- accommodations, opportunities, strategies for barrier removal)
- they also need to know their rights
- a call is needed to make technology more easily available and permitted
- literacy tests must be re-examined
- recognition needs to be made for different learning levels
- improved accommodation is needed for Franco-Ontarian consumers
- post-secondary employers and employees need to be better trained to understand student needs + remove attitudinal barriers
- there is a need for schools to make request book publishers to provide alternate formats

Dr. Kular thanked the participants, and noted that ODA comments will be "an important step in developing meaningful measures to strengthen the act with the government."

Consumers viewing the Webcast were invited to submit their ODA ideas and suggestions to the Ministry of Citizenship & Immigration, by phone or regular mail, before the deadline of March 31.

No Freedom Train: VIA refuses to make cars wheelchair accessible

by Eli Shupak

This article originally appeared in the January 29, 2004 edition of NOW Magazine. Reprinted with permission.

Train travel may be clattering for a comeback, but don't look for a smooth ride if you're in a wheelchair.

Venerable VIA, which makes much of its accessibility, currently finds itself in court fending off embarrassing charges by the Council of Canadians for Disabilities (CCD). It seems the Crown corporation ignored warnings and bought a fleet of cars that it knew were not wheelchair-friendly - all to save a few bucks.

The Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA), a federal oversight body, confirmed as much when it ruled late last year that the 139 Renaissance cars purchased by VIA from France in 2000 did not meet the agency's voluntary code for car accessibility.

Among the obstacles identified by the CTA ruling were:

- doors that are too narrow for wheelchairs, plus lack of turning space to accommodate wheelchairs in the "accessible suite";
- no accessible washrooms near wheelchair tie-downs, and insufficient space near wheelchair tie-downs to permit manoeuvring;

- too narrow aisle between the two washrooms in the economy coach cars;
- no space in the economy coach cars for persons who use service animals.

The CTA has ordered VIA to remove the "undue obstacles," but the decision has not been accepted gracefully at VIA, despite the fact that it's a Crown corporation. Canada's national transportation policy makes it clear that the federal transportation network should be accessible to people with disabilities.

VIA, which has argued against the need to retrofit the cars to make them more accessible (it says the work would cost between \$50 and \$100 million), has already challenged, albeit unsuccessfully, the CTA's jurisdiction in the matter. Several appeals have also been filed by VIA with the Federal Court of Canada.

"It's almost an abuse of the system," says an incensed Pat Danforth, chair of the CCD's transportation committee. "Four times we've had to go to the federal courts and argue the same thing. A number of grounds (VIA has) identified (in its appeals) have been dealt with before to a large extent in other decisions the CTA has brought down."

Danforth wonders if part of VIA's strategy in this whole affair is to keep appealing the ruling until the CCD, a non-profit organization, runs out of money to pay for the cost of litigation. It's already in debt to the tune of \$170,000 because of VIA's legal challenges.

David Baker, legal counsel for the organization, is baffled that VIA has managed to turn the case into a three-year process. In all previous litigation, he found that CTA matters were handled expeditiously and informally.

"I'm outraged at (former transport minister) David Collenette for allowing this to happen with taxpayers' dollars," says Baker. "He promised people with disabilities they would have trains that were accessible."

Collenette did not respond to NOW's repeated requests for an interview before he was replaced in cabinet. Instead, his office referred queries on the matter to new transport minister Tony Valeri, whose spokesperson, Christina Van Loon, offers that, "certainly, access to Canada's transportation system is a very important issue. However, because the decision is being appealed before the federal court, he's really not in a position to comment at this time."

John Champion, VIA's lawyer, calls any suggestion that VIA is trying to drag out the legal proceedings both "offensive and inaccurate... a last-ditch kind of argument for an extremely weak case."

Champion contends that the "very unique purchase" (of the Renaissance cars) was necessary for the company to acquire sufficient rolling stock, boosting its fleet by one-third. "The needs of the traveling population, both as a whole and for

(people with disabilities), have been met by VIA Rail like no other transportation system in the world." And he says the CTA's decision "is unhelpful to the overall needs of the system."

The Renaissance cars were developed in Europe in 1990 to offer fast overnight service between the continent and the northern regions of the United Kingdom through the channel tunnel. For a variety of reasons, the European contract for the cars was suspended in 1998 and the rail equipment, at various stages of completion, was offered for sale.

According to VIA, the cars came at a remarkably low cost and would have been unavailable at any other time. In its view, the \$130 million spent on them would normally have permitted the purchase of only 39 cars, and the process would otherwise have taken four years at a cost of over \$400 million.

Last October, however, Transport Canada found that the cars didn't meet Canadian safety standards, and major changes were required to correct the problems.

Campion says VIA Rail is nevertheless very proud of its acquisition and the way service is provided to those with special needs.

"I feel very strongly that VIA Rail has lived up to and surpassed its obligations to people with disabilities," he says. "In the balance between the costs incurred in the whole system for all passengers versus the cost for some passengers with special needs, we say you can't force and can't even require the government to spend that kind of money when there is no real problem."

Of course, ultimately that will be up to the courts to decide.

Consumer makes human rights complaint about Go Transit

The following is an edited version of a letter that one of our fellow consumers and CILT members wrote to Go Transit, reprinted with permission. This letter is an excellent example of self-advocacy at work.- Eds.

Dear Go Transit:

For the past 1.5 years, I have tried every avenue that I could think of to try and resolve a very disturbing safety situation at both the Whitby Go Train Station and the Oshawa Go Train Station. I am hoping that you will finally, once and for all, make these train stations safe for people with disabilities. Your customer service department is quite familiar with my situation and I am told that there is a very large file documenting all of the many complaints made in writing, by phone made by myself, my father, Gary Judd, MPP Jim Flaherty, the Ministry of

Transportation and by Don Carr. I have related my concerns also with the Durham Regional Police and the Town of Whitby, unfortunately with no satisfactory results.

In the event that this file is not clear about the situation, I will relay again what is happening to me on a daily basis. I use a power wheelchair for mobility as does my husband, Shawn. My three children also have the same physical disability as I do, and are all part-time wheelchair users. I tell you this because all of us on a regular basis have been threatened over the last 1.5 years.

I pick my husband up from the Go Train station in Whitby most days on either the 4 or 5 PM train. The Whitby station has seven disabled parking spots and a wheelchair van pick up area. Routinely the seven spots are occupied by customers some who have permits and many who do not. The wheelchair van pick up area is usually filled with customers who do not have permits and use the spots for their convenience. This prevents me from using these spots to pick up my husband. Several times a Go Transit maintenance vehicle is parked in these spots and for three months a construction trailer was parked in these spots. To be clear, these two areas are the only safe spots for a wheelchair pick up as my van lift requires four metres clearance. On a regular daily basis I have politely asked the customers occupying the parking spots illegally to move so that I may safely board my husband. Virtually every time I am met with extreme hostility, threats, profanity and on several occasions physical threats for daring to ask that I be safely able to pick my husband up.

My children have witnessed this threatening behaviour on a regular basis. They are bewildered and ask me "why are people so mean"? I have no answer for them. I fear that they have seen things that will permanently remain with them and will detrimentally affect them for the rest of their lives.

On one occasion, I had a paid attendant with me who very politely asked a customer to please move his car so that I may pick Shawn up and he was chased to the van by the individual who was illegally parked. Were it not for the locks on my van door, this person would have assaulted him. The threats to me and my family have been witnessed by my staff, my father, Don Carr and of course my husband and children. All of these incidents have been reported to Go Transit, the Ministry of Transportation, the Durham Regional Police, Minister Jim Flaherty's office, and the Town of Whitby. Each organization claims that Go Transit has ultimate responsibility for this situation.

To date, there have been some 30-40 calls, several letters and a personal visit by me to customer service at Union Station. Still I am each day reduced to tears as I attempt to pick up my husband. All of this happens in front of my children. This intolerable situation has left me and my family devastated and hurt beyond what words can describe.

I have made countless calls to Go Transit pleading for assistance. I have spoken with Sandy, Shirley among others all agreeing that the situation is intolerable and all promising to take action but still 1.5 years later there is not change.

For some time now I have abandoned the Whitby Go Train Station and used the Oshawa Station because I could not endure the continuous abuse. My husband has incurred additional expenses because we live in Whitby and it is more expensive to travel from Oshawa but we felt we had no choice. I did make an inquiry to Customer service regarding the lack of a wheelchair pick up at the Oshawa station and I was told that if there were no disabled areas that could be used that I should use the area where Go buses and Handi-Transit vehicles complete their pick ups and drop offs. Each day I arrived at the Oshawa train Station was a similar experience to the Whitby station but we had no option but to continue.

On February 3, 2004, immediately after a snow/ice storm I traveled to the Oshawa Go Train station to pick up my husband. All of the disabled spots were taken. The alcove that I frequently use (no parking zone) to pick up Shawn was filled as well. This kiss and ride had much snow and slush and would not accommodate my wheelchair van lift so I was forced to proceed to the Go Bus/Handi-Transit loop.

As I parked to prepare the lift, a Go bus driver left his bus and approached my van. He told me that I would have to move my van immediately. When I tried to explain my situation he angrily told me to park in the disabled spots. I mentioned that they were all taken and that there was in fact, no other areas to me to use he responded "I don't care just move your van now"! When I attempted again to explain that there was no area that would accommodate the lift, he threatened to call Go Transit security to have me removed. I responded that I would welcome that option.

I tried to help the bus driver to understand my situation and that both my husband and myself were in wheelchairs, to which he responded "I don't care if you are in a wheelchair... it's not my problem, move your van NOW"!

When I pleaded tearfully that he provide me with another alternative he just yelled and pointed toward the bus station over there over there"! When I again tried to tearfully explain that there were no areas "over there" he threw his hands up and left.

A few minutes later, a Go Supervisor pulled up to the van. By this time, I was barely able to converse and my husband was calling Go Transit customer service to complain about this inhuman treatment. The supervisor was the most helpful person to date and did listen to our situation. He asked us to follow him to what he thought was a reasonable alternative to park the lift but very quickly he realized that this option was completely unsafe. One of the Go station employees

came out and said to us that she has seen this problem and herself experienced the threats and abuse from customers illegally parked.

The Go Supervisor, Mark Turner, was very helpful and promised to do something to help. He gave me his phone number and indicated that he would meet me at the Go train station when I picked up Shawn to make sure we were safe until such time as Go Transit fixed this problem permanently.

On Thursday, February 5, 2004, Mr. Turner met us at the Whitby Go Train station and cleared those illegally parked so that I could safely pick Shawn up. Mr. Turner himself, on this occasion, was verbally abused when he asked a car to move.

I understand that Mr. Turner is not an employee of the Whitby Go Train station and that he is helping us because he himself cannot allow this to continue. He is the only Go employee to ever help us over the last 1.5 years and we all appreciate his kindness very much. This gentleman should serve as an example to all of the other staff that stood by and did nothing. I hope that you will recognize him for his outstanding efforts.

This situation, however, is not resolved. Mr. Turner cannot be expected to leave his job and travel to Whitby to clear the way for me to pick up my husband. In fact, he may at times be busy with other things.

The Human Rights Code of Ontario states:

"...Every person has a right to equal treatment with respect to the occupancy of accommodation, without discrimination because of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, same-sex partnership status, family status, disability or the receipt of public assistance. R.S.O. 1990, c. H.19, s. 2 (1); 1999, c. 6, s. 28 (2); 2001, c. 32, s. 27 (1)."

In addition, the Human Rights Code is quite specific in how individuals with disabilities must be accommodated.

"...The duty to accommodate persons with disabilities means accommodation must be provided in a manner that most respects the dignity of the person, if to do so does not create undue hardship (disability-policy_6.shtml). Dignity includes consideration of how accommodation is provided and the individual's own participation in the process.

Human dignity encompasses individual self-respect and self-worth. It is concerned with physical and psychological integrity and empowerment. It is harmed when individuals are marginalized, stigmatized, ignored or devalued (disability-policy_6.shtml). Privacy, confidentiality, comfort, autonomy,

individuality and self-esteem are important factors as well as to whether an accommodation maximizes integration and promotes full participation in society.

Different ways of accommodating the needs of persons with disabilities should be considered along a continuum from those ways which are most respectful of privacy, autonomy, integration and other human values, to those which are least respectful of those values.

Perhaps the most common example of an accommodation that demonstrates little respect for the dignity of a person with a disability is a wheelchair entrance over a loading dock or through a service area or garbage room. Persons with disabilities should have the same opportunity as others to enter a building in a manner that is as convenient and pleasant for them as it is for others."

I believe that all members of my family should be able to use the Whitby Go Train station without fear of harm and that Go Transit should provide for the safety of its customers with disabilities.

Transit not corrected a dangerous situation? Why has Go Transit so callously and disrespectfully treated people with disabilities such that they are reduced to tears? Why does Go Transit not want to work with the Cherry family to ensure a safe and equitable service? Why does Go Transit ignore the many pleas from many different people and agencies to correct this abomination? Does Go Transit not care to protect the rights of children? Does Go Transit not recognize the Ontario Human Rights Code?

As Go Transit has not responded to the myriad of attempts to resolve this situation, I am now left with no alternative but to file a complaint with the Human Rights Commission. I am saddened that we could not work together to find a solution.

I have been and will remain available to discuss this situation to its resolution. You may contact me at my home.

Sincerely,

Carol Anne Cherry

A View from a Chair: Water Closets and Me

by Lina DiCarlo

Throughout my life, using a wheelchair has given me interesting experiences. Some were amusing, some were irritating and some were downright horrible. I will try to give you a flavour of what the world is like from a sitting perspective.

I was in a mall in Toronto a few years ago and I needed to use the washroom. I always dread going into a public washroom, because I never know what I'm going to find! I'm convinced that a giant idiot has designed wheelchair accessible washrooms. Complaining to management doesn't do any good. They quote sections of the Building Code. I don't ever remember reading, "Management will install toilets at spec height. If you can't use it, well, that's not their problem." Pointing out that the Building Code states 'up to 23 inches' and not 'a *maximum* of 23 inches' doesn't do any good, either.

There were six regular stalls in this bathroom and only one that was wheelchair accessible. Of course, someone who didn't need it occupied it. So I waited. When the woman came out, she couldn't understand why I was annoyed. She held the stall door open for me as if that would make it all right. Sure, my name wasn't written anywhere, but I think a lot of people were standing behind the door when God was passing out common sense.

When I went in, the toilet was so high that I had to climb up to use it. My feet dangled in midair. I wondered if the giant ever tried to drop his drawers while balancing on a toilet. I assure you it's very tricky.

After my precarious balancing act, I descended from the porcelain mountain and wheeled over to the sink.

"Oh no! Not another gooseneck!" (These are specifically designed spouts that look like the neck of a goose. They curl into a large arch to, supposedly, make it easier for someone in a wheelchair. They are mounted on sinks four inches deep, which extend an extra foot, long enough to reach under my chin.) I could see the giant at work again.

The need to wash my hands quickly was paramount. The water comes out from such a height that when it hits the shallow sink it splatters everywhere and I can get my hair and the rest of me washed at the same time.

The fancy, flat handles were nice, but my arms needed to grow a lot longer to turn on the water! So I decided that a side approach was best. I turned the water on and wheeled back to the front on the sink only to run into a woman standing in front of it.

"I thought you were finished," she said.

"Oh! And you thought I turned on the water for you, right?"

"You don't have to be so snarky." She said, "You people are all the same. You're mad at the world. Well, don't take it out on me."

"Lady, I just want to wash my hands!"

She left in a huff.

I looked for the soap. What a surprise, the soap dispenser was too high. I had to ask someone to help me. Brushing my hair was out of the question. I could only see the reflection of my fingertips in the mirror. "What a major production for one little pee!" I thought.

One incident that infuriated me was at a movie theatre. I went to use a washroom, which, once again, was reserved for people with disabilities. There was a knock at the door.

"I need to use the washroom," a woman's voice said.

"Well, I'm using it at the moment."

"This washroom is for people who are disabled. You shouldn't be using it."

She continued to bang on the door, muttering under her breath. I heard her walk away, but seconds later she was back with someone else.

"This is the manager," a man's voice said. "There is someone with a leg brace who needs to use the washroom, please come out."

"I will as soon as I'm finished," I said.

The woman, talking to the manager, said, "What an attitude! Have you ever... Something should be done about this. It's people like her that make it bad for everybody else. I should get security."

When I opened the door, the manager was there.

"Why would you assume that I didn't need to use this washroom?" I yelled.

He apologized.

"Where is that woman?"

He pointed to theatre four. I could have let it go, but I was fuming. I followed her into the theatre. I caught up to her and said, "I was the woman in the washroom. You should be ashamed of yourself making such a fuss over a broken leg. You can use any washroom. I can't."

"It wasn't me," she said calmly.

Another time I was in the food building of the Canadian National Exhibition and

again I used a washroom reserved for people with disabilities.

When I tried to get out, the door was stuck. I pulled and pushed on the doorknob, but it wouldn't budge. I called out, but nobody heard me. I waited a few minutes for someone else who needed to use the washroom to push the door open from the outside. When no one came, I called out again, "Hello, can anyone hear me?" There was too much noise outside.

I was getting nervous and I was starting to panic.

But I have just about anything in my purse. I never know when I'm going to need a needle, a plastic bag, an umbrella or a screwdriver.

I used a Phillips screwdriver to undue the four screws that were holding in place a screen at the bottom of the door. I thought if I could make an opening someone could hear me. It took me 20 minutes to remove the rusty screws. Eventually, someone heard me and pushed the door open. I was shaking and sweating. I threw the screen on the floor and wheeled out as fast as I could.

I was calm when I found my husband. He asked me what had taken me so long.

"Rust," I said.

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