

In the Stream

Fall 2004

Simply People event marks new chapter in local disability movement

by Don Barrie

On Sunday, June 20, Torontonians with disabilities gathered at Nathan Phillips Square, to celebrate their achievements and uphold their pride through advocacy and entertainment.

Titled "Simply People: Celebrating Our Lives & Our Identities," it brought together several community leaders, advocates and allies of the disability movement in Toronto.

This event, organized by a disability and post-secondary education advocacy group called the Canada-Wide Accessibility for Post-Secondary Students (CanWAPSS), began with a march from Dundas Square to Nathan Phillips Square. The march was followed by an afternoon concert featuring performers and speakers (both disabled and non-disabled) on stage at Nathan Phillips Square.

"The idea for having it as a march came about as a suggestion from Uzma (co-founder of CanWAPSS), particularly since something like this had never been done in Toronto before by the disability community," says CanWAPSS co-founder Mahadeo Sukhai, a 4th-year PhD student of Medical Biophysics at the University of Toronto.

CanWAPSS is a new, grassroots advocacy group founded in Fall 2003 by Sukhai, along with Uzma Khan, a 4th-year Information Technology Management major at Ryerson University, and Julia Munk, founder of Students For Barrier-Free Access (SFBA) at the U of T. These three students formed this group out of a collaboration between SFBA at the U of T and RyeACCESS at Ryerson University. The CanWAPSS mission is to improve accessibility for post-secondary students with disabilities across Canada, through advocacy and support and special events. "Simply People" is the group's first major event, and represents a practical approach to delivering its mission.

"We'd always wanted a less political, 'let's all get together and have a bit of fun' atmosphere - while at the same time, of course, raise awareness." Khan says. "I set up a conference call with Julia and Mahadeo the night before sending out the event's initial press release. We exchanged suggestions, but nothing seemed to click. We all knew that the name needed to reflect that people with disabilities are people too."

It was Khan that finally suggested "Simply People: Celebrating Our Lives & Our Identities," because she says it was the one title that included all of their thoughts and ideas for this event.

The response from community groups was immediate, including the Adapted Scuba Association, ERDCO (Ethno-Racial Coalition for People with Disabilities), the U of T's SFBA, SAC and the Graduate Students' Union lent their support, as well as Ryerson's RyeACCESS and RyeSAC, and the Checkered Eye Project (a group representing consumers with visual impairments). Some of the entertainers included a belly dancer with low vision, and several bands (e.g. one of them was called "In-Between Breathing"). The guest speakers gave brief discussions on key disability issues such as education, employment, ODSP, transportation and multiculturalism.

"Our Simply People event brought the disability community together in celebration. Our event also demonstrated that an inclusive entertaining show is possible," Khan says.

While this event is regarded as a milestone for the local Independent Living movement, the inaugural event did fall short of some expectations.

"Although it was a beautiful day, not a lot of people showed up, about 20 for the march and about 40-50 for the concert," says ERDCO chair Rafia Haniff-Cleofas.

"Those numbers are pretty good considering it was the first event of its kind, but hopefully they will only go up in the following years," says consumer Lynda Roy.

"Given that we had to compete with Father's Day, the turnout wasn't so bad. But it must be bigger and better next year," adds Haniff-Cleofas.

Despite some other criticism regarding the limited amount of promotion done prior to the event, most consumers and event organizers are satisfied with how the day progressed.

"I think the greatest accomplishment was how we put the simply people event together within less than two months (about 6-7 weeks)," Khan says.

"We plan to make this an annual celebration," Munk adds. "Next year's will bring even more people together."

Canada elects first quadriplegic to Parliament

by Don Barrie

The federal election that occurred on June 28 was one of the tightest and dirtiest ever, producing a juicy series of headlines as the Liberal and Conservative parties fought to the finish. While most of the news stories focused on Paul Martin, his scandal-plagued Liberals and their verbal fisticuffs with new Conservative leader Stephen Harper, the Canadian disability community made history when this country elected its first quadriplegic MP.

Steven Fletcher, a 32-year-old Conservative from the Charleswood-St. James riding in Winnipeg, Manitoba, achieved an upset victory in his race against the popular former mayor who ran for the Liberals (Glen Murray).

Fletcher became paralyzed from the neck down in January 1996, at the age of 23, when a moose crashed through his windshield as he drove home from his job as a mining engineer in northern Manitoba.

"[The doctors] told me I might not live, or else I'd end up in an institution," he told the Toronto Star ("New MP expects equal access," published July 2) while celebrating his victory at his parents' home. "And I did end up in an institution: Parliament."

Like many consumers who have acquired disabilities, Fletcher acknowledges on his official Web site (www.stevenfletcher.com) that he didn't give much thought to disability issues before his accident. He notes that during his rehab period, he came to the realization that a contradiction exists in society towards people who have disabilities.

"On one hand, we 'save' or extend the lives of individuals and then we do not provide the resources to help these individuals, young or old, to have a reasonable quality of life," he says. "This contradiction is what initiated my first major political initiatives. I have learned, in no uncertain terms, the importance of family, community, and a social and political system that helps not hinders individuals."

Fletcher has also publicly stated that he vows to include disability in his agenda. For example, he says that he wants to improve access to essential services that non-disabled people take for granted, including better barrier-free access to public buildings such as Parliament Hill.

"I think they're going to have to make a lot of modifications and, quite frankly, if they haven't been done, they should be done," Fletcher said to the Toronto Star. "It's long overdue."

His other campaign priorities include health care, education, accountability in government and defense spending.

Prior to his election win, Fletcher accomplished many personal achievements during his first eight-and-a-half years as a quadriplegic. In November 2001, Fletcher became the youngest person - and the first person with a disability - to be elected President of the provincial Progressive Conservative Party (Manitoba). In 2002, he received honorary designations from the Canadian Institute of Management, and the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal for his contributions to Manitoba's social and political community. He also became one of the first consumers to demonstrate the use of a Trail Rider, a device from British Columbia that allows consumers with high-level disabilities to go back country hiking in the Rocky Mountains.

"The only visible minority that hasn't been represented in Parliament so far is the disabled," Fletcher told the Winnipeg Sun on June 30 ("Fletcher wins praise"). "I'm happy that I have a unique perspective."

Despite Steven Fletcher's remarkable election achievement, there are still some consumers who are troubled by it, particularly over his choice of political stripe. As a fellow consumer with a disability, I believe there is room for consumers of any size, shape or stripe to participate and have their voices heard at the federal level of government. It is quite refreshing to finally see some disability representation in Parliament, even if it does come from someone who represents a party that isn't always sensitive to the needs and interests of Canadians with disabilities. Whether or not he registers a high approval rating as an MP is something only time can tell.

"I'm all about empowering the individual," Fletcher said in the July 7 edition of the Toronto Star ("MP-elect ready for challenge"). "That [concept] is completely consistent with conservative ideology."

Good Idea in Osaka

by Susan DeLaurier

Recently I took a short vacation to the southern part of Japan and visited a few cities. Since I was only a tourist there for a short time, this should not be taken as a report on accessibility, but just some observations I have about accessibility in Japan.

The city of Hiroshima seemed to have fairly good accessibility and I think this is partly the result of a famous tragedy. After the atomic bomb was dropped in 1945, there was very little of the city left standing and there were huge numbers of injured people. While the city was being rebuilt, consideration was made towards how citizens who acquired permanent injuries and disabilities would live.

Osaka is a city at least the size of Toronto and I only saw a little of it in the downtown area. Osaka has sidewalk insertions for people who are blind or have low vision, which I think is a good idea. The wide yellow strips with bumps that are in place at subway station platforms in Toronto are implanted in many of the city's main sidewalks. They lead to street crossings, subway stations, and apparently many public services. Because it hardly ever snows or gets really cold in Osaka, this is a good accessibility feature. I'm not sure if this would work in many North American cities in the winter, but I think it would be something worth looking into.

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