

The Gazette

Day in a Wheelchair teaches how daunting life can be

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My arms are burning. My shoulders are throbbing. I am going around in circles, banging into walls, people and pets, all that can get in my path. I can't even make it into my bathroom, let alone shower, shave or excrete. I can't make coffee, because I can't reach anything in the kitchen.

My futility level has hit a new high, and I've spent a little less than an hour in a wheelchair.

In the end, I spent most of Victoria Day in a wheelchair; not because of any recent disability, but in an effort to get a sense of what those restricted to wheelchairs must contend with on a daily basis here. It was pretty much a nightmare. The major difference, of course, is that I was able to walk away from my nightmare at the end of the day. But my heart will forever go out to those who can't do the same at the end of their day.

I was one of several participants – from Global TV, CJAD, and Standard Life, among others – in the Chair Aware Challenge, being conducted this month to raise awareness and funds for the Action Centre, a LaSalle-based non-profit organization that assists and seeks to empower adults with disabilities.

My home and work environment are not wheelchair-friendly. So on this day, stairs have become a life-threatening obstacle. In fact, just about everything has become a daunting obstacle. I almost do a double gainer trying to get down to my basement office, sliding on my butt down the stairs. But even that proves far easier than crawling back up, using only my hands and shoulders.

Dog No. 1 is trembling with horror, avoiding the wheelchair. Dog No. 2 is more defiant, growling at the chair and attempting to bite the wheels. The wizened cat is clearly befuddled and keeping her distance.

And yet being inside is a breeze compared with what awaits me outside. I am already aware our metro system is not accessible to wheelchairs, although the MTC does have a bus service for the disabled. I have decided to wheel over to the Pepsi Forum to catch a flick at the AMC. Normally, this would be an eight-minute walk. Today, it will take 45 minutes, and that's with my mate, a registered nurse, by my side in case the wheeling gets rough. And it does.

Forget the burning arms and throbbing shoulders – and now the blisters on my hands – I can't even keep the bloody chair straight on the sidewalks. I have to use my left hand as a rudder on one wheel to keep me from veering onto the street and my right hand to turn the other wheel. I am getting nowhere fast. Crossing streets, even with lowered sidewalks and traffic lights, is terrifying. I have between 15 and 25 seconds to make it. That only sounds like a luxury. It's not. It's a panic situation. First, I must make eye contact with motorists about to make turns, because they don't seem to notice anyone not on their eye level. Once that's accomplished, there's the dash across the intersection, and almost every time I make the last few lengths thanks only to my companion pusher. There's no jay-rolling here. And heaven help you if you have to negotiate a speed bump.

Oh yeah, the able-bodied think their lives are at risk at pedestrian crosswalks. Try them in a wheelchair. At the corner of St. Marc and Baile Sts., one of the most dangerous pedestrian crosswalks in town, only one car of the 25 that passed me stuck in the middle actually stopped for me – as Gazette photographer Dave Sidaway can attest.

I finally make it to the AMC multiplex, which, mercifully, is fully accessible to wheelchairs. An elevator with signals I can reach takes me up a few floors. The theater has a designated area for wheelchairs. Next door is a massive washroom, also able to accommodate wheelchairs. Never have I been so content to sit through such a pedestrian comedy, *RV*. Even Robin Williams, annoying at the best of times, seems like a blessing now. Two hours of down time can do that to someone in a wheelchair.

There aren't many entertainment options out there for the wheelchair-restricted. Action Centre's Kevin Harrison, who has spent 15 of his 31 years in a chair, tells me there is only one bar-resto in the bar-resto-rich area of Crescent St. that can handle a wheelchair – Dundee's. On a work level, it's far more frightening. You're flat out of luck in most older and smaller downtown office buildings.

Following the movie, I decide to head across the street to Alexis Nihon Plaza for a little shopping at the PharmaPrix. Entering the drugstore is no problem, but everything on my shopping list seems to be on shelves far out of my reach. Fortunately, a clerk comes to my rescue and fills out my shopping list for me.

The able-bodied tend to be either courteous or oblivious. For every person who offers to help, push or carry, there are those who refuse to look at or acknowledge you. The best, though, was the well-dressed panhandler trying to hit me up for spare change. After mistakenly assuming a side entrance to Alexis Nihon would be accessible for wheelchairs and then returning to the main entrance to exit, I prepare for the long roll back home. Again, the trek is fraught with all manner of hazards.

Back home, I want to stay put, even if I can't access the loo and if dog No. 2 can't stop growling or biting the wheels. Anything beats having to contend with the real world in a chair.

The Action Centre's Harrison says that's precisely the plight of the physically disabled. Going outside is such a production that many would rather deal with cold, hard isolation inside instead. Add that, he mentions, to the poverty that afflicts most of this city's disabled served by the Action Centre. And then you might get a bit of an idea just how challenging life can be.