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2003 Manitoba Human Rights Awards Winners



Accepting the award for Youth Helping Youth were three members of the group, Dorain Zaharia, Clare Ashdown, and Allyson Gamble.

Winnipeg Harvest and Youth Helping Youth were the proud recipients of the 2003 Manitoba Human Rights Awards. This year's awards recognize work in the field of social and economic rights.

At the luncheon award ceremony held on December 10th International Human Rights Day, David Northcott, accepted the Manitoba Human Rights Commitment award on behalf of Winnipeg Harvest saying that "we at Harvest will continue giving with a loving heart."

Winnipeg Harvest has promoted human rights by working towards social progress and a better standard of living for Manitobans since 1985. Since then, the people behind Harvest have spoken out on many social and economic rights issues such as fair wages, nutrition and children, the right to food, taxes affecting the poor, rural poverty and food bank use.

Youth Helping Youth is a project developed in Winnipeg by a core group of eighteen young people. The purpose of Youth Helping Youth is for young people in Canada to raise funds to support education in Bangladesh and Nepal.

Although the group has been involved in many fundraising projects, most of the more than \$3,500 raised came from jewelry/pop culture buttons made from baking soda and cornstarch dough. These buttons are cut into various shapes and painted with gel pens or decoupage using stamps or written messages. The youth believe that the human rights messages on the buttons, foster social action and advocate change. They sell for \$2.00.

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The Rights Connection by Janet Baldwin - Chairperson Home for the Holidays

"I'll be home for Christmas, you can plan on me," opens one Christmas song. However, for some persons with a disability, the second verse may ring more true: "I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams."

Our public transportation systems were not universally designed - developed with all members of the public in mind - and rectifying this situation is slow. The Council of Canadians with Disabilities recently complained to the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA) about the obstacles to the mobility of persons with disabilities presented by the fleet of new passenger cars purchased by VIA Rail. The CTA found 14 "undue" obstacles and ordered VIA to remove them. VIA is appealing this decision rather than eliminating the obstacles. These obstacles also evidence a failure to meet the Code of Practice with Respect to Rail Accessibility, a Code which VIA helped develop and to which it expressed its commitment.

Other barriers continue to obstruct the travel of many disabled persons. Going to a Chanukah party across town may leave wheelchair-users to the constraints of Handi-transit, if the route to their destination does not have wheelchair accessible buses. Some persons accustomed to driving to distant gatherings find that a recent sight or hearing impairment leaves them ineligible to drive, within a licensing process that relies on blanket exclusions rather than individual assessments. These are just a couple of examples of obstacles to travel many persons with disabilities face.

Best wishes to all of you in the coming year and may it see many of these barriers fall. Another old tune comes to mind, with a twist: "Happy barrier-free trails to you, until we meet again."

Settlements

Manitoba Theatre Centre Leads the Way

Sometimes one person's complaint helps an entire group of people. The Commission refers to these as systemic issues and encourages resolution of such complaints whenever possible.

That's what happened when a deaf woman filed a complaint against the Manitoba Theatre Centre. In her complaint, she said that the theatre company had failed to accommodate her disability by not providing a sign interpreter at one of the plays she wanted to attend.

MTC was willing to enter into mediation and eventually an agreement was reached. In an unusual twist however, the agreement was with the Commission and not the complainant. Although the complainant could not reach a settlement with MTC during board directed mediation, the Commission was determined to move on this systemic issue and stepped in. The settlement satisfied both the Commission and MTC.

The settlement may not be ground breaking, but MTC is certainly at the forefront of offering a means for the deaf community to enjoy theatre. As early as 1980, some Broadway and Off-Broadway plays have been "signed" but other than that, few theatres have accommodated deaf patrons. MTC now exceeds the level of service offered by most other theatres in North America.

The agreement starts with a commitment to accommodate the deaf community by providing American Sign Language ("ASL") interpretation for one signed performance of a Mainstage production during its 2003-2004 season. Seats are set aside for hearing impaired patrons and their guests. As well, a photocopy of the play is sent to the person requesting a seat. Finally, ASL interpreters are sitting or standing nearby the assigned set of seats.

It's not a perfect solution but, everyone agrees that it is a good start.

MTC will publicize the ASL performance in its playbill and on the Internet and it will be proactive in ensuring that members of the deaf community are aware of the performance.

MTC is looking forward to feedback from the deaf community to see if this accommodation is appropriate or if there is another viable option to be considered. While it is consulting, MTC will continue to make a single signed performance available each season. In addition, if the MTC solution is thought by members of the deaf community to be the best option, MTC will consider including one signed performance of all its Mainstage plays at some time in the future.

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Dorian Zaharia, a member of Youth Helping Youth, summed up the inspiration behind their action. "We believe we can change the world doing what we are doing."

The keynote speaker at the event was Gail Asper, Managing Director of the Asper Foundation. Ms Asper referred to a belief she held in common with her father, the late Izzy Asper. "In spite of everything that happens, I believe, as my father did, in the goodness of people."

She spoke about the need for a Canadian Museum for Human Rights saying that too many stories have not been told. She referred to the Acadian expulsion in Nova Scotia and the internment of Ukrainians during the war. "Canadians need to know their stories of human rights." She added that the museum would also celebrate human rights and not just look at the dark side of history.

Both Success and Disappointment in Disability Rights History

Disability rights have come a long way since being included in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but there are still disappointments. That's according to Human Rights Commissioner Yvonne Peters. She was speaking at the Council of Canadians with Disabilities Luncheon.

Ms Peters said that discrimination on the ground of mental and physical disability was only included in the equality clause of the *Charter* at the eleventh hour. She said that originally it was omitted on the ground that "disability rights were too nebulous and difficult to define," citing a telegram sent from the office of Jean Chrétien who was the Minister of Justice at the time. It was received by members of the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPHO) in 1980.

COPHO was in its early evolution when it realized that this was a critical moment and mounted its first major political campaign and won.

Ms Peters said that the inclusion of persons with disabilities in *The Charter* represents a significant shift from an historical charity model of disability to a definitive disability rights model.

"It is more than true to say that we have come a long way since Jean Chrétien's office advised us that our rights were too nebulous and indefinable to be included in Canada's *Constitution*," says Ms. Peters.

There are still challenges. Ms Peters expressed profound disappointment when Via Rail disputed the rights of persons with disabilities to basic access. Earlier this year The Canadian Transport Agency had ruled that train access for persons with disabilities had to be improved. Via Rail has since appealed the ruling.

Upcoming Workshops

Harassment in the Workplace - learn what harassment is under The Code, why anti-harassment policies are needed and how to investigate a complaint of harassment in your workplace. (\$50.00 lunch included) January 28, 2004 9:00 a.m.- 12:30 p.m.

Employment Seminar - specifically designed for employers and supervisors, this full day interactive workshop deals with such topics as discrimination, accommodation, harassment and undue hardship. (\$75.00 lunch included) February 17, 2004 8:30 a.m.- 4:00 p.m.

For more information on these and other workshops call 945-3007