

Accessible shopping just one of the issues facing those with disabilities



THE SCOOP

MABLE HASTINGS

Having a disability makes life difficult. People with disabilities face a variety of challenges, both visible and invisible in accessing services including things that the able-bodied can take for granted. Imagine going from being perfectly capable to facing a decline in health leaving you physically limited in doing things you once enjoyed. Imagine the limitations in doing what you once enjoyed being amplified by a lack of consciousness or action on the part of businesses and places that once welcomed your patronage.

In recent years I have witnessed the reality experienced by a close friend who, after several knee surgeries, has lost a great deal of mobility and now must function using a wheelchair, walker or special walking crutches to get around. Outings now require more time, more planning and often disappointment.

The physical barriers faced at many malls, shopping centres and local shops are abundant and the majority are not designed with accessibility in mind. The basics of providing a motorized shopping vehicle with a shopping basket for convenience is limited to few big chain stores and those who have them often explain that while they have three or four, some are under repair and not available. This can make it difficult for people with physical disabilities to navigate the environment and my friend often sits and waits for her turn to use the only motorized cart. If the store provides a bench for her to sit on. This small courtesy is often overlooked.

The frustrations my friend experiences often leave her angry and vocal in her complaint. I have then observed an obvious attitude barrier from staff and other customers. Rather than sincerely taking action to encourage their employer to make changes to accommodate physically or mentally challenged customers, the attitude can leave the client feeling like a bother, unwanted or seen as being difficult. In the case of my friend who has always enjoyed shopping; seeing it as a social and mental "feel good," she now dreads the ordeal and prepares for disappointment.

Recently a new store opened in Granby. Super excited and looking forward to Christmas bargains and the joyous holiday ambiance, we set out on a shopping mission. In arriving at the store my friend was told that

they did not even have a wheelchair she could use. When she complained she was taken to the middle of the store, all of the managers and clerks surrounded her with their clipboards and as customers passed by trying to get a glimpse of the issue unfolding, my friend issued a written complaint and then exited the store. The holiday ambiance, joy and excitement lost to the able-bodied who strolled the aisles without issue or inconvenience.

Why not bring your own wheelchair you may ask? We tried this one day. To fit in the vehicle you must remove the foot rests. The chair weighs a lot. I cannot see how a handicapped person could maneuver this alone. Getting the chair out of the vehicle was one thing; getting it back in was a bigger challenge. Putting the foot rests on the chair was like a puzzle being solved on Survivor! After shopping, removing the foot rests and loading the chair found the two of us covered in slush and salt from the parking lot and winded at heaving it into the back of her car. My friend is in her mid sixties and I couldn't help but wonder how she manages in facing these situations.

In Sherbrooke we went to shop for bargains at a craft and art chain. I noticed a sign at the entrance stating that the store was all accessible, that they had the means to welcome those with physical or communication needs etc. The pride in this chain of being all accessible was evident and rightfully so. The sign, without stating it in writing truly shouted, "Welcome ALL."

Special needs individuals face issues in communication, transportation, accessibility, perception and more. Caregivers are not exempt from the prejudice either. Yesterday while waiting in a store parking lot I watched a caregiver tending to what may have been a handicapped family member. She was in a wheelchair unable to walk. The caregiver had to get the van, unload and prepare the ramp, load the girl, secure her in the van, reload the ramp...While he was doing this, the driver of a car wanting the parking spot was honking his horn and making gestures, not seeing what was happening on the other side of the van, out of his view. The caregiver patiently did what he needed to do but as I watched this happen, I was appalled.

All accessible shopping means creating a shopping experience that is inclusive, welcoming, and accessible to all people, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. An inclusive approach means retailers can not only meet their legal obligations but also attract a wider range of customers and improve the shopping experience for everyone.

If waiting on a parking spot requires you to honk your horn, display inappropriate hand gestures and use vulgar language at the inconvenience, imagine switching places with the person in the wheelchair or their caregiver. Trust me, you could be a whole lot more inconvenienced in putting on their shoes.



COURTESY

My friend, June Peacock sees the world very differently now that she is disabled

PHOENIX

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7 JANUARY 2024

3 PM

MINOR HOCKEY GAME

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SKATE WITH THE PLAYERS AFTER THE GAME!

PALAIS DES SPORTS

KIDS WEARING THEIR TEAM'S JERSEY GET IN FOR FREE!

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