

Accessibility key to understanding disabilities

*Dec 3 marks International Day of Persons with Disabilities*

*By Christine Peets*

Accessibility is an often misunderstood concept but it is the key to understanding those with disabilities, and how important accessibility is to them. Camden East resident Brian Shenton knows this all too well and for many years he has been working to improve accessibility as a member of the Accessibility Advisory Committee, which has representation from the Lennox & Addington County Council, and its four municipalities: Town of Greater Napanee, Loyalist Township, The Township of Stone Mills and the Township of Addington Highlands, as well as the Lennox and Addington County General Hospital. The majority of the committee members must be people with disabilities.

“I have been on the committee since its inception in 2003, and the amount of progress has been quite phenomenal, with access to municipal buildings and accessibility in all sorts of ways,” Shenton said. “I’ve been very pleased to be re-instated for each two-year term, and this committee is very supportive to me, and to anyone who has a disability.”

Shenton has what he said are mobility issues, so he is keenly aware of the challenges disabled people face, whether it is access to buildings, or access to facilities within a building. He thinks it is important to have a day for everyone to perhaps stop and think about accessibility. December 3<sup>rd</sup> was chosen by the United Nations as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities in 1992, and that day has been marked as such since that time.

“It’s a positive thing to have a particular segment of society [people with disabilities] recognized by the UN, and it is very important that we are not forgotten,” Shenton said. “There are many people with disabilities of one sort or another and it’s nice to be recognized, and for others to think about things that might be difficult for us that they take for granted.”

Murray Powell echoes that statement. He grew up in Napanee but had to move to Toronto for better employment opportunities. He said that while many things have improved, and there is definitely more acceptance of people with disabilities, and there is more accessibility, more needs to be done, and having this special day is part of a needed education and awareness program.

“The International Day of Persons with Disabilities gives some degree of recognition of how the world has become aware of creating a more inclusive society. We’re not there yet; we have to pick up the pace to head towards the ultimate goal where people with disabilities will be included in all aspects of society—education, housing, transportation, independent living, and employment,” Powell said.

“We [disabled people] are under-employed or not employed, but we are still employable. There are programs available to help employers, but we need to have a national policy that deals with disability rights, and has to apply across country.

There has to be an over-arching document because the provinces may have their own programs, but we need a national one.

In Ontario, the first piece of accessibility legislation, The Ontarians with Disability Act (ODA) came into effect in 2001. The province then mandated municipalities to form Accessibility Advisory Committees, and develop accessibility plans annually. In 2005, a new piece of legislation, The Accessibility of Ontarians with Disability Act, was enacted. This was broader as it applied to municipalities, other public sectors, and businesses, and led to the development of province-wide standards that affects all areas and aspects of accessibility including customer service, employment, information and communications, transportation, and design of public spaces. The goal is to make Ontario much more accessible by 2025.

“The goals are good, and there has been a lot accomplished, but there is a long way to go,” Powell said. “What we need is more education, and more understanding, especially as the population ages, and more people need these accessible accommodations. The world of accommodation is as complicated as it ever was, although technology is making it somewhat easier. We need to continually educate, starting with young children, because that will influence how they do things, and how they see things in the future.”

Shenton believes that the Joint Accessibility Committee has done a lot to educate the public, and the public servants, about accessibility issues. The committee is supported by an auxiliary panel, comprised of staff representatives from the hospital and each of the municipalities as well as people who work with people with disabilities. These currently include an occupational therapist and hearing care counsellor.

“I feel that our committee has done a great deal and we are constantly learning how people like me can be helped,” Shenton said.

Powell added that sometimes people don't know how to best help a disabled person, and that the best way to find out is to simply ask how to help, or whether the person needs help.

“It comes down to respect, and whether it's on a special day for disabled people, or anytime, that respect has to be shown, and accessibility for all has to be understood.”

#### SIDEBAR: Murray Powell shows his talents

Murray Powell is not only an advocate for people with disabilities, but he shows that a disability need not be a barrier. He has worked for different levels of government and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), and he has also become an actor and musician.

He has produced and starred in a video, “Napanee, My Hometown”, and in 2014, he wrote a song to say thank you, and to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the County of Lennox & Addington. Details about the video and his music can be found on his website, [www.footstompingmusic.com](http://www.footstompingmusic.com)

*Published, November 30, 2017, The Napanee Guide*