

Attitudes can hurt more than disability

America seems to be commemorating the International Year of the Disabled by shelving its programs for the handicapped.

That's the opinion of David Kleger, a rehabilitation counselor with the state Vocational Rehabilitation Division.

Every Friday Kleger counsels some of the University's 60 mobility-impaired students, 28 of whom are confined to wheelchairs. A burly man with a full beard, Kleger lost the use of his legs in an automobile accident at age 16.

"People find it to be one of the best institutions of higher learning for the handicapped, especially because of attitudes," Kleger says of the University.

Chris Goodrich, University counselor for handicapped students agrees. "I think Eugene is the most accessible city in Oregon."

'I wish I had a dime for every time I came to a door and someone would open it for me and stand there with their toes right where I have to go.'

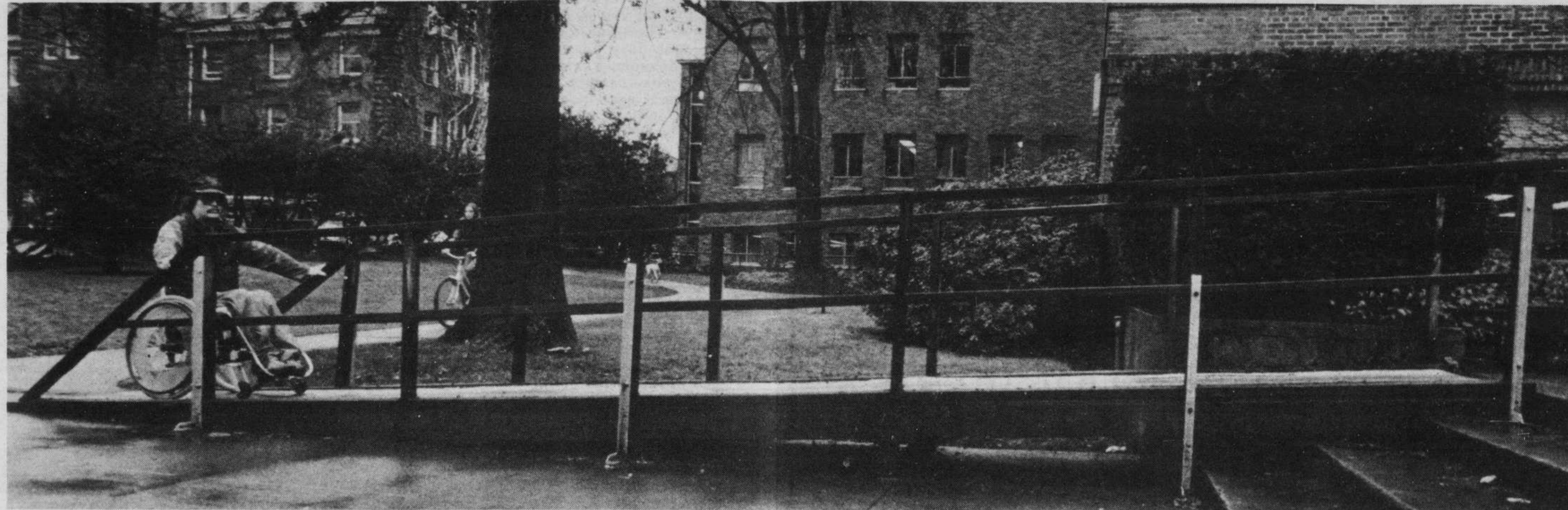
Because so much of the city is accessible, the handicapped aren't forced to sit home all day. Eugene's high number of accessible buildings, lowered curbs and lift-equipped buses is attractive to the handicapped.

Such improvements may be coming just in time. Because of advances in medical technology, more people survive disabling injuries to join a growing handicapped population. The percentage of Americans in wheelchairs has increased from a mere fraction to 2 percent since the 1930s, Kleger says.

The Vietnam War also left thousands of young Americans handicapped.

"When they went to continue their schooling after the war they said, 'This university is not accessible to me. It's not fair,'" Goodrich says.

Spurred by the civil rights movement, Congress passed the Vocational Rehabilitation Act in 1973, guaranteeing equal rights for the mobility impaired.



But eight years later, schooling for the handicapped is still an arduous undertaking. Disabled students must turn in a completed class schedule one month prior to registration so inaccessible classrooms can be changed if necessary.

Visually impaired students must order books in advance in Braille or on tape from the state library in Salem. If a needed book isn't in Braille or on tape, one must be specially recorded for the student, or the student must rely on a reader.

Deaf students must coordinate with interpreters or notetakers. Finding a person who can translate a graduate-level physics course into sign language can be difficult, Goodrich says.

"It's not the same as telling someone where the bathroom is."

Because of these restrictions, handicapped students' academic success often depends on another person.

"If you're waiting to study for tomorrow's midterm and your reader doesn't show up, you're stuck," Goodrich explains.

Not surprisingly, the University's disabled students are the "handicapped elite."

"The people you meet here are pretty extraordinary," Goodrich says. "They have made it. They have accepted their physically limited conditions and have worked out ways to deal with getting

around."

This is reflected by a lower drop-out rate for disabled students than for non-disabled undergraduates, he adds.

Adaptability is the key for the disabled to both surviving college and adjusting to life in general.

"I'm just amazed and baffled at seeing the ways people learn to deal with handicaps," says Goodrich, who is visually impaired.

He and a disabled friend worked out a symbiotic relationship enabling them to hunt deer in eastern Oregon.

"He couldn't chase the deer down and I couldn't see to shoot," Goodrich recalls, "so he'd shoot the

deer and I'd retrieve it."

Many handicapped students agree their capabilities far exceed their limitations. Man-made barriers therefore seem especially infuriating.

"I can hike in the Sierra Nevadas because they don't have steps," says Chester Faller, director of the Physically Limited Union of Students, "but I can't go to the restroom because it's not accessible."

Kleger says attitudes do more to cripple than injuries.

"Our culture has a mindset that a person with a handicap is incapable," he says.

"I wish I had a dime for every time I came to a door and someone would open it for me and stand there

with their toes right where I have to go."

And some of the frustrations are deeper, Kleger says.

"If a student lives far out in the west side and he can't park his car here, he cannot attend the University even if he's as smart as Einstein."

Handicapped people live on a small margin of safety, he says.

A simple mechanical failure in a wheelchair battery can leave a student stranded. Even sitting for too long in a wheelchair can be deadly.

"If I get a sore on my butt and it becomes infected it could kill me," Kleger says.

While a student at Portland State University, a "Good Samaritan" rushed over to assist Kleger transfer from his

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wheelchair to his car. As Kleger lifted himself to get into the car, his unnoticed benefactor pulled his wheelchair away. As a result, Kleger fell on the door sill, sustaining a bone-deep bruise that worsened into a pressure sore.

Such mishaps could be avoided if the non-disabled would remember three simple rules, Kleger says.

First, ask if your help is needed before jumping in to assist a handicapped person — the help may not be needed.

Second, listen when asked for help.

"Don't do it your way," Kleger says. "Do it their way because you could injure them if you help them the wrong way."

And finally, show consideration for the handicapped by honoring parking spots reserved for them.

"It is the thoughtless people in this world who render a disabling condition a crippling one."

Story by Jim Gersbach
Photo by Martha Stanton

Report lists 54 inaccessible buildings

Legislature delays improvements

By PAUL TELLES and ANNA HOYT
Of the Emerald

Almost all college students have adjustment problems when they start school. They face new demands and social situations.

But for handicapped students, these problems are compounded by a more basic difficulty — they frequently can't get into the classrooms.

A 1977 facility accessibility report, issued by the University, lists 54 buildings that need modification, ranging from stair ramps and door pressure adjustments to elevators.

When handicapped students find they need classes offered in inaccessible buildings, the classes often can be moved to accessible ones. But some inaccessible buildings house special equipment essential to study in some fields of study.

"One of the biggest problems, of course, has been the telecommunications and our mass media programs with electronic journalism," says Ray Hawk, University vice president for administration and finance.

"This isn't a case where you can move the program to the student because you have it wired for all the various sound equipment for both radio and television."

The four inaccessible buildings with the highest priority are Allen Hall, Deady Hall, Villard Hall and the Center for Volcanology, each containing special technical equipment available nowhere else on campus.

Villard Hall has a television studio and the campus radio station, KWAX. Allen Hall, where journalism classes meet, has computer equipment, a photography darkroom and typewriters. Deady has mathematical equipment, and Volcanology has geology lab equipment.

However, the necessary changes won't be completed until the Legislature appropriates the funds, a process that could take three years, according to Hawk.

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"We're faced with the situation where if a handicapped student wanted that program, we'd probably have to suggest to him that it's not possible at the University," Hawk says. "They'd better look at one of the other state schools where maybe their facilities would be accessible to them."

Hawk says the problem is regrettable but not confined to the handicapped. "If you wanted to take engineering, you couldn't take it at this university. You'd have to go to Oregon State," he says.

"I guess it's not totally unreasonable to say to a student that if it's going to cost us a million dollars to adopt a facility to make it possible for you to take the course, maybe it's wiser if you would go to a school that could provide it for you within their existing facilities."

The Legislature and the attorney general probably would concur in that opinion, he adds.

Some of the older buildings haven't been modified for handicapped students because it would require significant planning to make sure the alterations wouldn't detract from the buildings' characters, Hawk says.

In 1973, Congress passed a law requiring institutions that receive federal funds to make their resources handicapped-accessible by June, 1980.

However, the necessary changes won't be completed until the Legislature appropriates the funds, a process that could take three years, according to Hawk.

"The University is caught in a situation where we would really like to see every

building accessible. We think ultimately this is the way the University should be," Hawk says.

"But being a state institution, the funding comes from the Legislature. We're powerless."

The 1979 Legislature appropriated funds for handicapped accessibility projects, but withdrew the money during the special budget-cutting session this summer.

Hawk says planning for the alteration of some buildings nearly had been completed before the session, and those projects will be finished. But plans for other buildings had to be shelved.

Despite Hawk's explanations, Chester Faller, director of the Physically Limited Union of Students, isn't satisfied the University is lobbying hard enough for the money.

"They're certainly willing to raise the money for athletics, but they're not willing to raise the money for accessibility."

Faller says problems in the older building's construction is "a lousy excuse."

"I don't care to have every closet in the university accessible, but I want to be able to take part in programs as if I wasn't disabled, which the law says I should be able to do."

Since handicapped students pay the same tuition as able-bodied students, Faller says they should be able to expect the same services.

Faller says very few students complain about the lack of classroom accessibility, even after they are denied access to crucial classes.

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