

## *Encountering various attitudes about accessibility*

### **Audrey King's Story**

I've always wondered why it is that two of my close friends have gone out of their way to ensure their homes and cottage are accessible whereas no one in my extended family has done so.

Is it a question of money?

Is it because I don't visit family that often?

Is it because they don't see inaccessible homes as a problem?

Is the topic taboo?

It is not that they don't love me.

Every time I've visited it's been a frightening, undignified struggle just to get up the front steps with portable foldable ramps of various types and sizes. Also, using the facilities inside involves seeking privacy behind a closed door with a makeshift container. Family members don't mind assisting me of course, but perhaps I'd prefer independence.

When I was a teenager my father built a ramp at the back door of our new home. In the home before that I had to sleep downstairs, away from my sleeping family and carried into the bathroom when necessary. Homes were not accessible. Bathrooms in particular have notoriously always been too small for anyone in a wheelchair to enter and use.

Growing up, as I moved from home to home and apartment to apartment I just got used to the status quo. Access wasn't an option. When at home and especially when travelling, essential luggage always included "bed pan and bowl." I lived with the fact that I was often not invited to people's homes or excluded from private social events in people's homes for reasons of inaccessibility.

One of the most hurtful exclusionary events happened when I was at a family backyard barbecue. It began to rain. Everybody scurried inside through the "narrow" screen door, leaving me trying to shelter under a slatted wooden porch over my head. Yes, I was dripped on. Everybody laughed from their cosy couch and cushions inside. It wasn't in the least funny. It was hurtful and exclusionary! And, just to rub salt in the wound, the screen door (which I used to be able to go through) had been replaced for security reasons only a few months previously. Why did they choose a narrow door?

To my knowledge, accessibility needs have never been considered. Yet a few weeks ago a niece phoned to get advice about a ramp for her front steps so a good friend in a wheelchair could come to visit. Her elderly mother who lives downstairs has recently had a stroke and struggles to come up the stairs for meals. I can't help but wonder what conversations and considerations have been made to solve that problem, which will only increase with age as well.

Finally, in 1979, after 30 years of a second-class home hygiene life, I found a condominium with wider bathroom doors, Doors wide enough to allow independent entry with my power wheelchair. I was so thrilled I sat all day with my hands just paddling in the sink.

When I asked my “accessible housing” friends what motivated them to make their homes and cottages accessible, their opinions were clear. They wanted to share their homes with all their friends and neighbors, including those with disabilities, both now and in the future. They were also planning for their own futures as they age or become disabled, so they can continue living in their own home and community with little extra expense.

I don't know why accessible housing isn't talked about, isn't considered important. Whatever the reason, every human ages and accessible needs increase.

Let's get it in the Ontario Building Code. Once and for all!!

*Audrey King survived polio at age 9.*