

Wheelchair activist breaks through barriers to access

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GUELPH — Matt Wozenilek is an in-your-face wheelchair activist fighting for himself and others with mobility issues.

But he'd rather wrangle concessions from the owners of inaccessible buildings than rely on emerging provincial legislation.

The former school teacher has had success in recent years persuading businesses and others to see things his way, including convenience stores, doughnut shops, the Guelph Mercury and MP Frank Valeriote, though Wozenilek at times appears impatient and still has a way to go to convince everyone.

"There are all sorts of things that could be done. If I make a difference for myself, that helps everybody else," the 60-year-old said over a cup of coffee at an easy-to-get-to Tim Hortons on Speedvale Avenue, one of his success stories.

Whereas ageism is chauvinism against older individuals, ableism is inequity, sometimes unintentionally, against people of limited mobility, like those getting around with the help of wheelchairs and other aids.

Among admirers of such activists who promote accessible buildings is Ontario Lieutenant Governor David Onley, who was in town Tuesday to attend a disabilities conference organized by the University of Guelph's Centre for Families, Work and Wellbeing.

"It's a priority because without physical access, you may as well have a sign on the door saying 'no physically disabled people allowed in,' " said Onley, who has difficulty walking and uses a scooter.

It's no different, he added, than the discrimination people of colour once faced. "It is a barrier," Onley said.

Disability in one form or another affects a slight majority of Ontarians when their family members are included, Onley said.

Wozenilek was raised in Port Credit and Orangeville. He studied geography and English at the University of Guelph, in a city he's called home since 1985, but became a computer science and business teacher for 22 years at area schools, including Guelph Collegiate and John F. Ross high schools.

But in recent years he's increasingly depended on a wheelchair to get around because of a neurological condition first diagnosed in his mid-20s. While the condition is stable today, "the damage was done," he said. "My quality of life has diminished dramatically."



Wheelchair activist. Matt Wozenilek poses near his Stevenson Street home with his dog Irene. The former Guelph high school teacher is now a wheelchair activist fighting for mobility issues. Tony Saxon/Guelph Mercury Source: Guelph Mercury

He lives in his house on the city's east side and relies on disability insurance. With limited energy from the illness, he has home-care workers who make day-to-day living a little easier. "My first priority every day is to maintain my health."

His focus on accessible buildings "came out of a need." That need was a desire to live an independent life and feel equal to everyone else. He couldn't get into the 7-Eleven convenience stores in his neighbourhood, so he approached them to install accessible entrances, which they ultimately did in 2009 after he filed a complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal.

"It was me asking for personal accessibility." Soon, two neighbourhood Tim Hortons locations also came on board, with Wozenilek preferring to think he helped influence their decisions. An M & M store and Candies of Merritt in Speedvale Mall also made their businesses accessible.

But his batting average isn't perfect. There is continued resistance to innovations such as ramps and power doors. Sometimes he's had to repeatedly remind property owners of new and continuing reforms to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, which is intended to make it easier for people to access buildings.

His focus is on establishments he frequents, and he said he has no intention to seek changes at other places. He admits he's been accused of harassment, but he's confident more businesses will see the benefit of making life easier for customers. "It's going to take time and it's going to take education." It may also take altruistic able-bodied clients putting pressure on building owners for the greater good, he added.

Frank Valeriote said he was already thinking about making changes to the entrance at his Cork Street constituency office, which had only a temporary ramp, when Wozenilek made his pitch for a ramp and automatic doors. That allowed the Liberal MP to approach his landlord with a cost-sharing proposal.

"I want to applaud Matt's efforts," Valeriote said, adding that Wozenilek "has put a lot of time into this (issue) and he has met with some success."

Wozenilek also runs a website — stopableism.org — that he uses as another tool to raise awareness. Along with links to things such as the Ontario Human Rights Code, he has a list of places in Guelph that are friendly to people in wheelchairs.

But among those who think Wozenilek has overstepped himself is Guelph MPP Liz Sandals, whom he hasn't convinced to convert a street-level entrance to her constituency office on Woolwich Street. It has a temporary ramp and a buzzer that brings an assistant to open the front door for a visitor requiring assistance.

"I would say the office is wheelchair accessible," Sandals said. "We have people in the office all the time who are in wheelchairs."

Sandals added it's an old building that can't be converted, though she did install a wheelchair-accessible washroom after consulting with the city and landlord.

She added legislation doesn't require massive renovation that would take much of historic downtown Guelph out of the building stock. "You would de facto render those buildings unusable," Sandals said. "It was never the intent of the act that existing buildings be totally compliant."

Wellington County, with its own accessibility advisory committee, has developed a facility design manual for new construction and major renovations.

"We're doing a lot within our county buildings," county accessibility clerk Jennifer Cowan said.

An example is the new Puslinch library that opened in September, with barrier-free ramps, wide, automatic doors, wheelchair-accessible washrooms, wide aisles and “assistive” technology, such as computer screens for the visually impaired.

Guelph Barrier Free Committees, a volunteer organization, is working toward an independent, accessible, equal and inclusive environment for people with disabilities, though it isn’t focusing on the active advocacy of Wozenilek, chair Jean McClelland noted.

“We promote positive accessibility,” she said. “We can’t go to places and demand anything.”

The 15-member committee and its subcommittees prefer educating the public about accessibility issues. This is done through initiatives such as events last summer at the West End Community Centre, which promoted activities like soccer for the visually impaired and wheelchair basketball.

The barrier-free group also holds annual awards for people who have made significant improvements in the lives of people with disabilities. “Anyone can nominate people,” McClelland said. Her group has a new website — guelphbarrierfree.net — a Facebook presence and can be found on Twitter, she noted.

Onley, who uses an electric scooter, told his Guelph audience this week the public shouldn’t think of people with mobility limitations as disabled. Most people at some point in their lives experience such limitations. “In short, we are all disabled or eventually could be.”

Thus, he stressed, people aren’t in any real sense handicapped “except through the barriers of others.” Inclusiveness to Onley means being seen as a full member of the larger community.

“We are not a full community without one another.”

In the audience was human rights and equity consultant Laurie Arnott, who is sympathetic to Wozenilek’s efforts to make buildings more accessible, particularly in the downtown core.

“That’s been one of the problems with downtown Guelph,” said Arnott, who uses a wheelchair. She disagreed that more can’t be done, particularly in this age of technological innovation and better construction techniques, though she conceded the hurdle may be costs associated with change.

Arnott is asking people to be receptive to innovative thinking to make the world inclusive for everyone.

For Wozenilek, the downtown Norfolk United Church renovation that added an elevator is an illustrative case in point.

“I see that as one of the finest examples of accessibility,” he said.

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