



Reach: Equality and Justice for People with Disabilities

Despite some advances, there are still many barriers facing Canadians living with disabilities. For many people with disabilities, the biggest challenge is not their physical or psychological conditions. It is the attitudes and social practices that so often exclude them from participating in, and contributing to, society.

Reach is an Ottawa-based voluntary organization that empowers people with disabilities to overcome these barriers. The organization helps people with disabilities in Ottawa-Carleton and eastern Ontario resolve legal issues by linking them with lawyers. Reach also provides a variety of educational programs and conferences to increase awareness about issues of disability and human rights. Recently, it has begun to tackle the barriers faced by people with disabilities in institutions of higher education.

Background

Reach was launched in 1981, the International Year of Disabled Persons. The organization sprung from the experience of policy analyst

Rod Carpenter, who lives with cerebral palsy. A student at the time, he was unable to open his own bank account because he could not sign his name. His bank would not accept his thumbprint on cheques instead of a signature, so he had to rely instead on a bank account in his mother's name. Ernest Tannis, an Ottawa lawyer who taught a course in which Rod Carpenter was enrolled, agreed that this was unacceptable and helped him take the bank to court. They won, changes were made to *The Bank Act* and Rod got his bank account.

The two men subsequently formed Reach to help other people with disabilities fight injustice and discrimination. Today, Reach's six employees field close to 5,000 calls per year from people with disabilities who are seeking legal information or assistance. More than 250 lawyers in the Ottawa area volunteer their time and expertise to help people with disabilities resolve legal issues. Each lawyer agrees to donate three hours of *pro bono* time to a client; if more assistance is required, fees are negotiated between the lawyer and client.

Paula Agulnik has been Reach's Executive Director since 1985. "It was an organization I fell in love with right from the beginning," she says. "The people are superb." The organization's Board of Directors includes people living with disabilities as well as representatives from law, social services, health services and business. Hundreds of volunteers assist with fundraising, education and awareness work.

A broad range

Reach is one of the few organizations that responds to the needs of people with a range of disabilities, including physical and psychiatric disabilities, head injuries and 'nonvisible' disabilities such as Crohn's disease or chronic fatigue syndrome. One Reach client sued an airline for prohibiting her from travelling without an attendant because she is paraplegic; she won. A woman who is deaf was arrested outside a club because she couldn't hear police questions and an officer interpreted her affected speech as a sign of drunkenness. With the help of lawyer Lawrence Greenspon, a Reach volunteer, she sued for false arrest. The suit was settled out of court.

Other cases have been less dramatic, but no less important to the people involved. A Reach volunteer ensured that a wheelchair dealer honoured a warranty and repaired a faulty chair. Another explained social services documents to an elderly woman who could no longer see, while another managed the transfer of power of attorney on behalf of a person with Alzheimer's. Reach legal volunteers also have helped countless people obtain the disability benefits to which they were entitled, assisted with landlord-tenant disputes and advised on family legal matters.

The changes to *The Bank Act* that followed Rod Carpenter's legal victory are not the only legislative changes that Reach has spurred. Reach

President Mark Berlin, a lawyer with the Department of Justice Canada, contributed to the development of amendments to the *Criminal Code* and the *Canada Evidence Act* to accommodate persons with disabilities. The changes to the *Criminal Code* include amendments to allow persons with physical or mental disabilities who have difficulty in communicating to provide testimony through videotape, and to encourage persons with disabilities to serve as jurors. One amendment to the *Canada Evidence Act* provides for communication assistance (such as sign language, interpreters, assistive listening devices or real-time captioning) for persons with special communications needs. Another permits auditory and tactile methods of identifying accused persons – for example, a person with a visual impairment can use touch to identify an accused person in a 'lineup.'

"This is the first time in my 24-year athletic career that I have had full access. Your organization has set an excellent example. My deaf friends and I thoroughly enjoyed the event."

Paul Landry, Microsoft Run for Reach participant, 1997

Another important part of Reach's work is the coordination of educational programs and conferences to increase awareness about disabilities and human rights among people with disabilities, their families, health and social service providers, and the medical and legal communities. Reach's monthly 'Brown Bag' lunch-hour seminars cover topics such as changes to human rights legislation that affect people with disabilities; community resources for people with disabilities; implications of human genetic testing; environmental sensitivities; chronic pain; eating disorders; housing options and employment opportunities for people with disabilities; and mental



Participants in the Microsoft Run for Reach.

health issues. Annual conferences have included Chronic Pain as a Disability; AIDS – The Changing Challenge; Genetic Testing/Screening; Pathways for Healing – A Mental Health and Disabilities Project; Pathways to Safety (safety issues for women); Death – The Question of Choice; and Access to Justice.

Partnerships are key

Reach receives no public funding for its core programs and services. Instead, the organization depends on partnerships and annual fundraising events to enhance community awareness and involvement. The idea is that by participating in Reach, partners take ownership of the issues and contribute to a more civil, caring society for all persons with disabilities.

Reach raises most of the funds for its work through the Compaq Annual Celebrity Auction, the Swing FORE Reach Golf Tournament and the

Microsoft Run for Reach. The auction, which has been sponsored by Compaq for the last three years, is a high-profile event attended by more than 600 people. A committee of volunteers scours the region for companies and individuals willing to donate items to be auctioned. Additional items are included in a ‘silent auction,’ in which people submit written bids for items that are displayed. Celebrity auctioneers have included Bruce Gray (a star of the television program *Trad-ers*), local restaurateur and philanthropist Dave Smith, and local radio personalities. A number of companies purchase tickets for corporate tables, and the high-tech company Rebel.com sponsors a cocktail party before the auction for these donors. Each year, the auction raises more than \$100,000 for Reach.

More than 600 people participate in the wheelchair race, in-line skate, various corporately-sponsored runs and the ‘costume pet walk’ that make up part of the Microsoft Run for Reach. Microsoft Canada, JDS Uniphase, EXOCOM and

Enbridge Consumers Gas are major sponsors of the run. Vittoria Trattoria, an Ottawa restaurant, provides a pasta dinner for participants the night before and supplies post-race refreshments. A number of other companies contribute prizes, merchandise and items for participants' 'race kits,' such as the Reach toothbrushes and floss often provided by Johnson & Johnson. Allegro 168, a local graphics company, does the artwork for promotional materials, and Marsh Canada provides insurance.

Reach's emphasis on partnerships extends to its unique office-sharing arrangement with Hilton Canada. Hilton pays part of the office rent and, in exchange, Reach provides administrative

assistance to Hilton's national staff representative. It's a 'win-win' situation for both organizations.

Education equity

Mark Berlin was the catalyst behind another Reach initiative: a comprehensive study of education equity in Canadian law schools. As a part-time professor at the University of Ottawa law school, he was struck by the low numbers of people with disabilities in law school. Although it is estimated that persons with disabilities comprise nearly 18 percent of the Canadian population, this is not what he saw in his classes. "I'd look at my



Dr. Bruce Mills (left) presents Rodney Carpenter with a plaque commemorating the 15th anniversary of Reach in May 1996, while Reach Assistant Director Louis Buschman looks on.

class and see a nice, equitable distribution of men and women, and members of visible minority communities, but I almost never saw a person with a visible disability,” he says.

Bothered by this, he decided to look more closely at the obstacles and barriers that people with disabilities face in law school. As he notes: “It seemed like a good fit for Reach, given that it is concerned with the law and with persons with disabilities.” With funding from Human Resources Development Canada and the Department of Justice Canada, a project was undertaken to examine the efforts made by law schools to accommodate students with disabilities, and to provide strategies that law schools could use to improve learning opportunities for these students.

The final report from this work, *A Framework for Action*, indicated that physical access to law school facilities and the availability of accessible course materials continue to be serious problems. Significant issues also are arising from the demand to accommodate a rapidly increasing number of students with nonvisible disabilities, such as learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders and mental health conditions. The report included a number of recommendations for law schools wishing to develop policies and procedures for the accommodation of students with disabilities.

A second phase of research, funded by Human Resources Development Canada, is under way to examine the issues from the perspective of law students with disabilities. Reach hopes to find funding for a third phase of work that would look at the hiring, encouragement and promotion of people with disabilities after they graduate from law school. As Mark Berlin notes: “There is a sad history of people with disabilities not being easily hired, not being retained by law firms and not getting the right promotions.”

Many of the findings from this study are not specific only to law schools. The findings are equally applicable to other faculties, such as medicine, dentistry, engineering, science and the liberal arts. As Paula Agulnik notes: “The model identified in the *Framework for Action* could be applied in almost any university faculty.”

“For nearly 20 years now, Reach has successfully brought public and private sector forces together to address equality and justice issues that have been identified by community members who have a disability. Reach offers a process for change that builds partnerships, mobilizes community resources and empowers individuals to work together in a spirit of inclusion and engagement. This is what building communities is all about.”

The Right Honourable Ramon J. Hnatyshyn,
Honorary Chairperson of Reach

Reaching out

The organization continues to reach out to people with disabilities in the community. A toll-free line funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario enables people throughout Eastern Ontario to call Reach free of charge. In 1996, Reach opened a satellite office in Vanier, a city adjoining Ottawa, to provide increased services to the region’s francophone community.

For the past three years, with funding from the Trillium Foundation, Reach staff member Sherrol Peacock has worked to increase awareness of Reach’s services among members of visible minority and aboriginal communities as well as the francophone community. In many cultures, people with disabilities are much less visible than



(Left to right) Reach Board member Renette Sasouni, Dr. Bruce Mills, Paula Agulnik and Board member Nicole Vallée on the first anniversary of the awarding of the Franklin D. Roosevelt International Disability Award.

in Canada. Families are expected to care for people with disabilities on their own, and many people with disabilities seldom leave their homes. Many recent immigrants to Canada are unaware of the services available to people with disabilities and uncertain about whether they should ask for help. Much of Sherrol's work involves contacting social workers, agencies that assist recent immigrants, and cultural and community organizations to explain what Reach does, so that these people then can promote Reach's services to their constituencies. She also regularly sends notices about Reach events and activities to cultural and community newspapers and invites representatives from diverse organizations to attend Reach's Brown Bag lunch seminars and other events.

Sherrol notes that the precarious funding of many community organizations makes the job challenging. In many of the centres that assist aboriginal and visible minority groups, most staff

work on contract, so there is considerable turnover and Reach must constantly promote its services to new people. Still, the outreach efforts have been bearing fruit. "When I first came on," says Sherrol, "general client calls to Reach were not showing the mix of the population. Now, we are receiving more client calls from diverse communities and referrals from community workers."

Reach invites organizations that work with diverse communities to set up information booths at the Microsoft Run for Reach. This enables the organizations to see Reach in action, and Reach volunteers and participants in the run can learn about the organizations. The benefits flow both ways – some participants in the run subsequently have volunteered for organizations that were present.

"As we reach out to diverse communities," says Sherrol, "it's making them start to think

about problems related to accessibility for people with disabilities. Some are finding that their elder populations as well as people with disabilities are not able to use their centres, and are starting to look into this.” She notes that an aboriginal organization recently held a brown bag seminar to encourage dialogue between aboriginal people with disabilities and OC Transpo, the regional public transportation agency, and invited Reach to attend.

No resting on laurels

The staff and volunteers of Reach are always looking for new ways to increase awareness of the needs and potential of people with disabilities. In 1998, after being nominated by Reach, Canada won the Franklin D. Roosevelt International Disability Award for its achieve-

ments in improving opportunities for people with disabilities. Reach Honorary Chairperson, the Right Honourable Ramon J. Hnatyshyn, and then-President, Dr. Bruce Mills, were invited guests of the Prime Minister of Canada when he accepted the award at the United Nations.

Ultimately, Reach hopes to encourage the replication of its highly successful approach in other communities in Canada. Discussions are under way in Halifax with disability organizations, the Nova Scotia Barristers’ Society, the Canadian Bar Association of Nova Scotia, the United Way and the regional office of Human Resources Development Canada to see if there is potential for a Reach-type approach there. As Paula Agulnik notes, the Reach model “is the easiest, least expensive program imaginable” and could be very effective in other communities.



Lawrence Greenspon drums up interest in a painting at the Compaq Annual Celebrity Auction.

When asked what advice she would give to people thinking of starting a similar initiative, Paula Agulnik notes that “the major thing is to have a passion for what you do. Search for people who care and have the same passion. Organizations like ours need to partner with fine contributors and sponsors in the community who will share or adopt the passion. Constantly search for these partnerships. Appreciate the ones you have and constantly search for new additions.”

Mark Berlin adds: “Don’t get sucked into thinking that you can only devote a few minutes a month to something like this. Once you get involved, you get *very* involved.” He also notes that Reach’s success was not achieved overnight. “It took years and years of goodwill and proving that we are willing and able to do the job,” he says. “Be patient, be willing to partner and to share, and don’t be frightened if others want to get involved – there’s enough work to go around!”

Ann Simpson

Ann Simpson works on the community stories series for the Caledon Institute.

For more information on Reach, contact Paula Agulnik at (613) 236-6636, e-mail reach@magi.com.

Postscript: With support from the National Literacy Secretariat, the Halifax discussions that Reach began last fall, have resulted in an exciting initiative that promotes the benefits of linking disability and literacy. Why? Reach understands that finding and keeping a job in today’s competitive world requires advanced literacy skills as well as the confidence and opportunity to use them. In this regard, many Canadians with disabilities still face a shortfall in education. Many are unemployed or underemployed, living below the poverty line. For them, improved literacy skills and accessible learning opportunities are keys to an improved quality of life. **Reach Nova Scotia** is well on the way to incorporating this understanding into their “access to justice” efforts. “Reach Nova Scotia aims to play the role of facilitator in highlighting the literacy challenges of people with disabilities in this millennium. In all activities throughout local communities, Reach will demonstrate respect for plain language and for its potential to engage all people with disabilities.” Says Paula Agulnik: “As individuals with disabilities receive advice and assistance from lawyers, they learn about their rights & gain the confidence that comes from respect and consideration. Ultimately, people with disabilities will create their own opportunities to contribute to community life - culturally, socially and economically.”

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