

UNL holds barriers for handicapped

by Randy Beam

The University of Nebraska is full of barriers. Not barbed wire fences or Berlin Walls, but curbs, narrow doorways, bicycles and stairs.

And they all limit the physical mobility of the severely handicapped student on campus—the one in a wheelchair or the one without sight—in the same sense that a barbed wire fence might stop most of us.

In 1969 only 31 per cent of some 65 buildings on both City and East Campus were at least partly accessible to the severely disabled student, according to results of an architectural barrier survey conducted by the home economics honorary Phi Upsilon Omicron.

The group's sponsor, Dr. Lois Schwab, though pleased that efforts have been made to raise this percentage, still maintains the situation has not changed enough in two years to negate what the survey says—that it's hard to get places by yourself on this campus if you're in a wheel chair.

Only nine buildings, including Pound Dormitory, six class room buildings and the stadium are listed as fully accessible. Even though the Nebraska Union is also considered to be such, most of the five wheelchair students on campus find the ramp too steep to maneuver by themselves.

A fully accessible building is one where the handicapped student can function independently—as any other student could—doing simple things like getting a drink (fountains are often not installed close enough to the ground) or going to the restroom (special stalls must be available to permit a wheel chair to enter.)

The honorary also conducted a "wheelchair run" for a typical day of classes. The results: special assistance was required 54 times to get over curbs, through narrow doorways and up steps. And assuming the student lived at Selleck Residence Hall, as many handicapped do, special provisions for meals were also needed.

The blind face a different set of barriers.

The three students interviewed of an estimated seven on campus, had all suffered bruises as the result of bicycles left parked in sidewalks. And one called crossing 16th Street by the Women's Residence Halls "a nightmare."

Additionally, sisters Barb and Laurie Beach maintain that there are many unnecessary barriers on campus, especially on the union mall. Moveable flower planters, trash cans and benches create such a hazard that the blind sisters hesitate to travel there.

Other bothersome obstacles: ironing boards (and irons), boxes and desks left in hallways.

The text book proves yet another formidable educational barrier. Blind students approach this problem from three directions: either by sending away for tape recording, or if no tape is available, soliciting a volunteer or paid reader to tape the book, or securing a brailled text.

The University plays no active role in this process, except to provide a list of books needed. How a book gets read, and how much it costs, is a burden borne by the student. He, in turn, is reimbursed for expenses by the state, depending on need.

Some scattered efforts to establish a reader's service for the blind at NU have been made. Don Payne, a counselor, has volunteered to try and get readers for students who need them, although no one

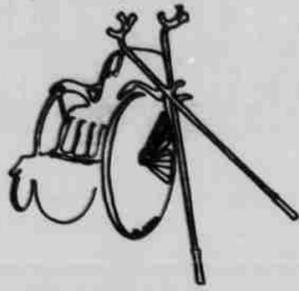
The Daily Nebraskan talked to had taken him up on

his offer.

It's been just in the last five years that the University has initiated an ongoing program to remove architectural barriers, according to chief design engineer George Burnham.

Codes enacted by the Unicameral during this period have provided impetus for this change, George Miller, administrator at the NU physical plant, explained.

"Students aren't greeted anymore with stairs like they used to be," Miller said, singling out Hamilton Hall as an example. Ramp entrances, he noted are incorporated into all new building designs, along with standard fall-length steps (for the blind), elevators and wide doors. Old buildings are remodeled to provide alternate entrances for the handicapped whenever possible, he said. The added costs for these changes, Miller assured, are not great.



Special class scheduling problems are handled by Dean Lee Chatfield of Student Academic Services. In some instances, he reported, whole classes have been moved to more readily accommodate a handicapped student. But the number of requests for this type of change has been small, he added.

To what end is all this effort directed? The answer so many interviewed provided is "independence." The University says it wants to allow maximum mobility with minimum assistance.

Former NU graduate student Nancy Erickson, who wheeled around campus the last two years, put it this way: "The main thing is to be as independent as possible, but on this campus it's about impossible."

Students discuss problems

by Randy Beam

Barb and Laurie Beach are blind, but getting around campus doesn't rate as their biggest problem. Their biggest problem is getting to know students.

"Socially we're pretty much out of it, but a lot of it might be our own fault," Laurie said.

Nancy Erickson, a former NU graduate student, spends most of her day in a wheel chair. She says getting acquainted with other students wasn't that difficult, but noted that being a grad student gave her a head start, although she didn't go to NU for undergraduate study.

"A lot of this has to do with your own attitude," she said.

Bearded Charles Armstrong III is frequently seen in the Nebraska Union, on his yellow motorized scooter called an "electrovelocipede." He's angered by many things, but particularly by what he called a

patronizing attitude, and students who are blinded to their own prejudice.

And blind freshman John Coyle says he experiences no significant problems relating to sighted students.

Barb and Laurie spend most of their spare time with other blind students, although that's not how they say they want it.

Laurie explained: "The blind are a minority group which is treated pretty much like any other minority group. People seem hesitant to get involved with us."

This attitude, in some cases, Barb said, extends to roommate relationships. Though she indicated that she and her sister have never had much problem, one blind friend had two roommates move out.

To prevent this, Barb suggested the housing office notify potential roommates for blind students in advance of their roommate's handicap.

"Some kids just don't want a blind roommate," Barb asserted. "It makes them conspicuous and some don't know how to deal with this special situation. They feel inadequate."

Referring to the roommates who moved out, Barb said: "We think part of that might have been due to the fact that they were not told beforehand. We can't seem to convince anybody that this is something that should be done."

Armstrong was more ardent in his criticism of student attitudes toward the handicapped. An inability, as he prefers to call it, only means there are certain physical activities he cannot participate in. Socially, he said, a handicapped student can participate equally with anyone else.

"We are not any less a person because of our disabilities," Armstrong stated.

He voiced criticism of student dating attitudes toward the handicapped. Studies indicate, he said, that 95 per cent of NU students would not consider marrying a handicapped person, and another 67 per cent would never date one.

Armstrong paralleled a handicapped person's status in American society to that of a black's, calling both second-class citizens.

Nancy Erickson found most people "willing to get to know me, but it was my responsibility to make the first move," she said.

The biggest problem is "getting people to look beyond my disability to what's underneath."



Charlie Armstrong



Laurie and Barb Beach

Turn to page 4.