

Lied Center elevator increases accessibility

BY KELLY SCOTT
Staff Reporter

Disabled patrons of the Lied Center for Performing Arts have a new option when deciding how to get to the concourse level — they can take the elevator.

The elevator is the newest improvement made to accommodate disabled people at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

It replaced a hydraulic lift that had been in place since 1989, when the Lied Center opened, said Charles Bethea, executive director of the Lied Center. The hydraulic lift was designed to allow patrons in wheelchairs access to wheelchair seating space on the concourse level.

Unfortunately, the lift didn't work well.

Bethea said the lift was too small, too slow and too prone to breakdowns.

The \$100,000 elevator that carries patrons a necessary 6 1/2 feet was completed at the beginning of this year's season at the Lied Center and has been working well since, he said.

"It increases accessibility for all patrons," Bethea said.

Accessibility is a major issue for the Lied Center. The staff is examining the Lied Center's facilities for user-friendliness and accessibility, Bethea said.

Before the installation of the new elevator, all patrons in wheelchairs had to use the entrance of the Johnny Carson Theater to get to the hydraulic lift. Now, all patrons can use the front door, giving them the chance to move around easily during intermissions and to get to receptions before and after performances on other levels, Bethea said.

"The best thing about the elevator is that we don't have to turn any patrons away from the front of the Lied," said Carol Ide, Lied Center house manager and usher coordinator.

The elevator also has helped the more than 340 core usher volunteers at the Lied Center and the usual 75 working during performances, Ide said.

Without the elevator, she said, an usher would have to accompany patrons using the hydraulic lift in the cramped space. Now, patrons can easily use the elevator without an usher, although ushers are still present near the elevator in case extra help is needed.

Bethea said the elevator was especially helpful for the Lied's large crowds, especially for the sold-out showings of "Les Miserables" in September.

"A performing arts center like the Lied is about creativity and connecting the public. The elevator helps us do that," Bethea said.

UNL steps up disability aids

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Center — are responsible for making sure disabled students still can pursue their college goals on a level playing field, said Marie Ward, director of Services for Students with Disabilities.

Recently, UNL made new improvements to campus buildings to make them more accessible. The improvements include a new elevator in the Lied Center for Performing Arts, changes in restrooms and design in the Nebraska Union and the addition of a ramp in the new Undergraduate Observatory on top of the Stadium Drive Parking Garage.

A computer lab in Mable Lee Hall, equipped with special software to meet the needs of disabled students, also has been added.

Continuing renovations will be prioritized by safety concerns, Horn said. Focus will turn to East Campus buildings and the Bob Devaney Sports Center, which has poor accessibility in its restrooms and seating.

By January, Horn said, a Web site for Services for Students with Disabilities and the Accommodation Resource Center will be in place. And by March a searchable database, Accommodation Solutions On-line, will be operating so students can look up specific disability situations. This will be the first of its kind in a university anywhere in the country.

Technological improvements to be made next semester include upgrading the multimedia classrooms to include software designed specifically for students with various disabilities and continued acquisition of equipment.

UNL students now use programs that are voice-activated, specially designed keyboards that accommodate disabilities like carpal tunnel syndrome or computer mice that are controlled by foot instead of by hand.

"It is a moving field. Every week there is something new," Horn said.

Horn said she was working to create written policies on class substitutions and waivers for individual colleges on campus. By January, Horn expects to have a complete written policy for the College of Arts and Sciences.

Ward said she was planning to meet with UNL officials about the new admissions standards, which have affected the admission of students with disabilities.

The number of disabled students has increased at UNL since 1985 when about 25 students used services. But because of this year's new

admission standards, that number has decreased since a 1994 peak, when 400 students received assistance, Horn said.

There wasn't enough time to inform high schools about the new standards because university implemented the new requirements so quickly, she said.

For instance, if students couldn't take a certain class in high school because of their disabilities, but the new admissions standards required that class, the students may be denied admission. Normally in those cases, the university will grant a special waiver so those students still can enroll at UNL.

"I think we need to make sure high school students are aware and better prepared and we need to make sure there is an appeals process for students with disabilities," said Horn.

Alison Frazier, a senior international relations major, said although conditions at UNL have improved and are improving, UNL still has a long way to go.

"Things are better than they were my freshman year. Then, no one could tell me where the accessible restrooms were," Frazier, who uses a wheelchair, said.

But some buildings like Nelle Cochrane Woods and the Military and Naval Science Building are inaccessible for some without assistance, Frazier said.

"The major problem I have with improvements at UNL is that the main entrance of the new union is not accessible," Frazier said.

"I don't understand why they couldn't make a main entrance that is easily accessible. It doesn't seem like a big deal but it is," Frazier said.

UNL started improving accessibility and accommodations in the mid-1980s when it targeted improvements in residence halls. Working closely with Housing Director Doug Zatechka, the university added elevators, air conditioning and automatic doors to Selleck Residence Hall, Horn said.

In 1988, UNL developed a cooperating program with Saint Elizabeth's Heartland Health Care Center to ensure students access to personal attendants if needed, Horn said. Before this program, individual students were responsible for employing personal care.

With the help of Chancellor Graham Spanier in 1992, a systematic renovation to increase accessibility in campus buildings began, Horn said. Automatic doors were added to all major campus buildings and restrooms were made handicapped

accessible.

In 1995, Horn said, she accomplished her biggest feat in terms of renovations when a ramp was added to historic Richards Hall. Curb cuts, or ramps, were also added to campus sidewalks, and seating was improved in the Love Library auditorium.

Services for Students with Disabilities and the Accommodation Resource Center are continually improving to give UNL students who have disabilities equal access, which is required by the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Accommodation Resource Center, established in May 1995, works with the Services for Students with Disabilities, which was established 13 years ago. Horn said the Accommodation Resource Center was responsible for instituting the accommodations determined by Services for Students with Disabilities. Services for Students with Disabilities is the personal contact for students on campus.

"We are here to help the students be more independent rather than dependent so that the students can be advocates for themselves," Ward said.

The center provides:

■ Academic services. Students can get one of the more than 400 volunteers to take notes for them, receive special test accommodations, help registering on NRoll and get interpreters to go to class with them.

■ Technological assistance. Computers with adaptive equipment and programs which can provide audio sound or closed caption options are available to students.

■ Advocacy. Students can voice concerns and discuss university policies and procedures.

■ Housing. Housing accommodations can include flashing fire alarms, electronic doors, first floor rooms and single room accommodations.

■ Campus recreation. Students can use exercise equipment designed to improve upper body strength or play on the wheelchair basketball club team.

■ Parking services. Handicapped parking is moved around to accommodate the areas where it is most needed depending on class schedules.

Adding on to the increased improvements and range of services is always a focal point for both centers, but Ward said she thinks UNL is doing a good job of accommodating students with disabilities.

"If you take a look at this university in comparison to other universities, we are way ahead of the game."

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Journalists prepare to do jobs

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nesses should prepare themselves mentally. "You can't compare it to anything."

He has spent time on the World Wide Web, he said, looking at the pros and cons of the death penalty. He has also been reading a book on the protocol of executions.

"Just things to gear my thinking to this being an official kind of function," he said. "Emotionally, I don't think I would find it very acceptable."

Tysver said she started thinking she would be selected as a witness about six months ago, but said she really hadn't done anything to get ready for today.

"I don't know if you can prepare yourself for something like this," she said.

She said she had deliberately tried not to talk to many people in recent days about the execution.

"It's not something I want to talk about too much," she said.

But she said the walk-through the witnesses went through a few days ago was a big help in getting her prepared.

"I did think about declining it. ... But I decided to do it based on the idea that it was part of my job."

BILL HORD
Omaha World-Herald Lincoln bureau chief

Unlike the Harold Otey execution in 1994 and the John Joubert execution in 1996, none of today's media witnesses have ever seen an execution.

Hord said he did have thoughts about saying no to the offer and passing the witness role on to another World-Herald reporter.

"I did think about declining it," he said. "And the closer it gets, the more I wish I would have. But I decided to do it based on the idea that it was part of my job."

Hord said his family had been a help in the week leading up to today's scheduled execution.

"They've been very calm about it,"

he said of his five children and wife. "They're interested but not in a way that is intrusive."

His family, he said, realizes it is part of his job.

A job that requires him to be inside a room watching the state's ultimate justice take place.

Both Hord and Tysver said the three hours or so hours they will spend in the prison today may be the most difficult story assignments of their careers.

"It very likely stands to be the most difficult and most awkward assignment I've had," Hord said.