

# People with Disabilities are Just People

by linda mcgowan

Have you ever wondered about the reactions of those around you?

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is something that most of us learned in school or college. Basic needs are something we've all learned about through living.

It often takes energy and commitment to convince others that having a disability does not alter your basic needs, feelings about the world, about people. A disability does not change your desire to participate. At various times people with disabilities have worn an assortment of labels – handicapped, moron, retarded, dumbo (the grey elephant has nothing on us), challenged – physically, mentally, visually, special needs. There's nothing special about our needs, they are just needs.

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? Aside from mobility aides such a cane, walker, wheelchair, visual or auditory aids such as glasses or hearing aids, the same characteristics that are shared by everyone, gaze back at you. Underneath your outer layer a heart beats, sensitive feelings exist, a soul needs nourishment.

So when you branch out into life with friends, family, strangers, keep in mind that you are no different than anyone else. Activities of daily living may be performed in a different way or with assistance but they still need to be addressed. We need to eat, shower, dress, interact with friends, enjoy movies, read books, walk in the park, smell the flowers, attend community events, and explore the world.

As most of you know, I travel near and far. In some countries, people with disabilities are excluded by the community. A few cultures feel that they should not appear in public. Canada is not like that.

We are fortunate to have a country and government that share a philosophy embracing inclusion. There are times and places where my disability (and yours) is a barrier to full participation, but we all need to focus on



*maslow's hierarchy of needs*

abilities. In Canada, people with disabilities participate in the mainstream of society. We work, we play, and we interact. In Canada you can ski or water-ski on a sit-ski. You can climb mountains using a Trail Rider. You can enjoy sea walls in Vancouver – even though you can't run them, you can walk or wheel, or if that is too much of a challenge, you can sit and read a book, sip on a cup of tea, or doze in the sun. Employment, although sometimes difficult to find, is available. Social programs provide, for those who qualify, basic monthly income, assistance with the purchase of mobility equipment and other medical needs. Volunteering is promoted. Canadian society is holistic. Individuals with disabilities, when blended into the community, are greater than the sum of their parts.

When I started to travel to other countries on my own, my children were very concerned that I may be met with insurmountable inaccessibility. "What will you do?" "I will make it work."

I know that I can't always achieve what others can. With enough ingenuity, flexibility, time and patience, incredible joy and pleasure can be extracted from every experience. We all have a responsibility to educate ourselves, family, community, the world, bringing enlightenment to the illusion that we are different.

We are one and the same.