

DAWN TORONTO
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October 19, 1986

Dear Lesbian sisters:

D.A.W.N., or the DisAbled Women's Network, Toronto is sending you an open letter from our DisAbled Lesbian Caucus. We ask respectfully that you publish the attached letter in your newsletter, put it up on your bulletin board, discuss it in your collective meetings, debate it, discuss it, attack it (if you must), but do not ignore it.

We know many of you and your organizations have made solid efforts to be accessible and we salute you! Special thanks to Womynly Way, the Lesbian Community Dance Committee, the Toronto Women's Bookstore, the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre, Side by Side, the Metropolitan Community Church, the Gay Community Appeal, and all others who have fought for and struggled with accessibility.

We ask you to, if at all possible, NOT EDIT the OPEN LETTER. Every item, every word has been carefully thought through and every deletion would count. We know it is long and that is why we are sending it to you print ready. It is long, but for most of you this will be the first time you have really made space for accessibility issues. Remember eighteen (18%) per cent of all women are disabled. Most women's newsletters have not yet had an issue focusing on disabled women. A little space is, we feel, not too much to ask.

If you have any questions, please call Joanne at 466-2838 (but do not publish this number, although you can, if you wish, publish the rest of this letter).

We thank you for your support.

Your disabled sisters,

THE DAWN LESBIAN CAUCUS

AN OPEN LETTER FROM THE DISABLED LESBIAN CAUCUS OF THE DISABLED WOMEN'S NETWORK,
D.A.W.N. TORONTO TO ALL LESBIAN AND GAY ORGANIZERS, GROUPS AND ACTIVISTS

Who would think of putting out a flyer saying:

LESBIAN EVENT, NOV. 30 at Mr. Straight's Union Hall. 8:00 PM. \$4.00 admission. DISABLED LESBIANS NEED NOT APPLY.

No one, but no one.

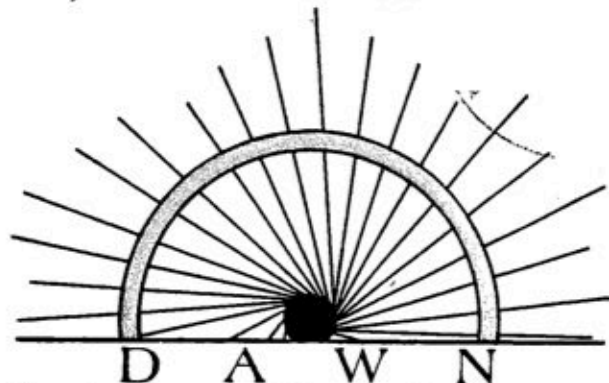
Yet, often, even usually, that's what the publicity for your event says to disabled dykes -- and you may not know it, want it, or expect it. Your intentions may be good. We all know what road is paved with good intentions. Your problem is usually that you don't know about accessibility. Our problem is that we can't get in to your event, or group, or workshop, or dance.

Accessible means different things to different people. Here's what it means to us. This is the bare minimum for accessibility.

For a woman who uses a wheelchair, accessibility means no steps (a good ramp and/or level entrance), an adapted washroom (with grab bars, a sink that her chair will fit under, and room to get the wheelchair in the cubicle so that she can move sideways off her chair onto the toilet seat).

For deaf women, it means sign language interpreters. It means a phone that has a Telecommunication Device for the Deaf or T.D.D. so that she can phone up and find out about the event. (These things are not as expensive, or hard to get as you think. Just ask DAWN).

For visually impaired or blind women, accessibility means having printed material (programs, agenda, newsletters, etc.) available on cassette or, in some cases, Braille. It means that her Seeing Eye Dog is welcome and that you don't pet that dog (it's working) without her express permission. It means you offer to guide her to her seat or across a street, but you do not force your attentions on her. (You DON'T GRAB HER BY THE ARM AND HAUL HER BODILY ACROSS THE STREET. That's assault, not help.) Good lighting and large print programs can make all the difference for women with low vision.



For developmentally disabled women, your attitude and language are the key to accessibility. When was the last time you called someone "a retard, an idiot, a space cadet or an imbecile"? While we're on the subject, how do you think severely mobility impaired women react to "basket case"? Or women who have survived the psychiatric system? How many times do you call someone "crazy, nuts or right out of it"? Another one to watch is: "Confined to a wheelchair". You aren't confined to a car even though without it's assistance you normally don't travel at speeds of 50 miles an hour. Of course not, you drive your car. And we use our wheelchairs.

For most invisibly disabled women, those who have a disability you can't see, accessibility is primarily a flexible open mind on the part of non-disabled women. For a woman with epilepsy, it may mean no strobe lights or flash bulbs at the dance or concert. For a diabetic or hypoglycemic woman, it may mean a nutrition break. When someone needs a break, don't hassle them. And don't plan all day events without at least a lunch break. (We thought non-disabled women liked to eat too, but we've been to some events where no break was planned).

For women with environmental illnesses, accessibility means at the very least, SMOKE FREE SPACES. Yes, Virginia, smoking is an accessibility issue. If you haven't seen Mary lately, maybe it means that Mary had an asthma attack from your cigarette.

For some disabled women, accessibility means an attendant to help her go to the bathroom, eat or be there for her needs. For example, DAWN has trained attendants for the Lesbian Community Dance Committee. And we think that's great. Or the woman

might want to bring her attendant with her. If she does, the attendant should be admitted to the event free of charge. (Even the Metro Zoo does this much. You don't charge a woman to admit her wheelchair. An attendant is a technical aide in the same sense).

Sometimes DAWN members call up and ask if something is wheelchair accessible and we get told, "Yes". We get there and find steps, but the organizers say, "Oh, it's accessible, we'll carry you up."

WRONG. WRONG. WRONG.

First of all, it's DANGEROUS. What if you drop her? What if you sprain your back? What if there's a fire? What if you break her wheelchair? (Some of them cost as much as a new, small car). What if she uses an electric wheelchair? These electronic beauties weigh over 400 pounds. Secondly, toting her up the stairs like the groceries robs her of her independence and dignity. How can she relax and enjoy your event if she has to worry about being dropped on the way out? Or if she feels that she's been treated like last week's trash?

Even when events are accessible, you often don't see disabled women at them. One reason is transportation. Wheeltrans, Toronto's alternative transport system for the disabled is separate, but certainly not equal. For one thing, did you know Wheeltrans users aren't allowed Metropasses. They have to pay full fare every time even though they are the poorest women around. That's discrimination, but even worse we have to call at least 7 days ahead to book a ride and even then it might not work out. Or they could drop us off at the event at hour late and pick us up 24 hour early. (So much for spontaneity!)

So disabled women may need a ride. Someone, somwhen, someplace, please, please give DAWN our own wheelchair van. If there's a goddess out there...

Last, but never least, accessibility means publicity. Lesbian and gay organizers rarely think to publicize their events in the newspapers of the

disabled movement. Many of you are unaware that blind and visually impaired people have their own community phone calendar. If you want us at your event, advertise where we read.

And when you do advertise events, every event should have information about accessibility. If they are not accessible, the publicity should say so. If they are accessible, the symbols below should be used.



Be specific. For example, "Hall wheelchair accessible. Bathroom not." And consult with DAWN. We know what accessibility is. And we know what it isn't. And we know how to do it at the least expense and hassle and who to go to.

At this point, maybe your heads are shaking and your more business-oriented types are yelling, "But it's not COST EFFECTIVE". (The rest of you may be saying, "It's too expensive").

Being disabled has never been cost effective and it never will be. The same school of non-thought that calmly killed millions of Jews, gypsies and gays and lesbians in the name of racial purity, fed us disabled to the ovens because we "cost too much", among other things. The cost argument is forever used to deny us jobs, health care, dignity and everything else human life and dignity demands.

So forgive us if we retch when we hear that argument from you, our lesbian sisters. And don't tell us we're unreasonable, bitter, twisted and demanding because you can't handle our rage.

We must never, never, never shut any lesbian out. We feel that non-disabled lesbians need to form consciousness-raising groups around able-ism, the oppression of the disabled. You need to deal with your problem of excluding us. And the time is now because disabled women around the world are organizing!