

'Handicapped' a misnomer

By Walter Stallings

Jim Hayes was a pleasant switch. Often people in positions of authority evade issues in an interview. The new handicapped students adviser did not.

He talked in detail about the problems the physically handicapped face. He also offered surprisingly simple solutions. As he said, he understands these problems because he deals with them daily. Hayes was confined to a wheelchair following an accident nine years ago.

He said that with hard work the problems can be resolved. I believed him. Yet I left the interview feeling it was the responsibility of the able-bodied who, through ignorance, have created most of the difficulties.

Buildings are constructed ignoring the needs of the handicapped. For example, braille elevator buttons, lowered switches and curb ramps would not inconvenience the able-bodied but could be a tremendous psychological, as well as practical, boost to someone who really needs them. Recently enacted statutes will help.

However, the biggest problem is with people like myself, the able-bodied. We are the handicapped ones. We are afraid of our ability to cope with the handicapped; so we ignore or evade them.

When I came here almost four years ago, I met a man I have come to trust and respect. John Dycus, Shorthorn adviser, is confined to a wheelchair. He has had as much influence on me as anyone I can think of.

Not only has he spoon-fed much of what I know about journalism, but he's made me realize something about myself that probably holds true for most other people.

On meeting him, I could not deal with a handicapped person. Maybe it was through ignorance or a lack of experience. Somehow I felt I should act differently around him. As I worked with him, I realized how foolish this was.

My uncomfortable feeling disappeared. I realized that John is not, just as Jim Hayes is not, a handicapped person. They are simply in wheelchairs. It's a limitation, but who doesn't have limitations?

The law will see that the physical barriers fall. It is up to people to see that the emotional ones topple.