MARCH 2020

The Bison Sports Arena, built in 1970, was the home of intramural activities, physical education, and varsity athletics until the end of the 2014 season. Extensive remodeling was done and it reopened during the 2016-17 season renamed Sanford Health Athletic Complex (SHAC).

The SHAC was nearing completion in December 2016 when Keith and Sherry Bjornson and Jerry Christiansen visited. They noticed that the wheelchair spaces were all in the nosebleed sections, they went to see what the view was like from up there. Keith pulled into one of the wheelchair spaces and Jerry went to the top row of bleachers in front of him. When Jerry stood up, they determined that during an exciting time of a game when everyone stood up, a person in a wheelchair would not be able to see the game. A person sitting in a wheelchair would only see the backs of the fans in front of them.

Keith, Sherry, Jerry and Nate Aalgaard met with the architect in charge of the project in January of 2017 to talk about the issues they saw at the SHAC. The primary focus was the accessible seating, because the main reason to go there is to watch a ball game. When Keith, Sherry and Jerry visited again in February of 2017, nothing had changed. Later that spring, Keith filed a complaint with Tara Iversen at Department of Justice (DOJ). The DOJ opened an investigation and about three years later, this headline appeared in the Thursday, January 30, 2020 edition of the Forum: “NDSU ARENA BROKE DISABILITY LAWS.”

The story in the Forum focused on non-compliant accessible seating at the SHAC. Accessible seating includes wheelchair spaces with companion seats, the line-of-sight for those spaces, accessible aisle seating and the dispersion of the accessible seating. Other non-complaint features found include: inadequate number of accessible parking spaces, some non-accessible signs inside the building, lack of accessibility at concession

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By Tyler Axness

From Where I Sit

From where I sit, the work of Freedom Resource Center is having a positive impact on our community. Not only are barriers being pointed out, but they’re also being removed. People have begun to take notice. The latest example can be found in North Fargo at the Sanford Health Athletic Complex (SHAC).

I have taken a seat at the SHAC. From where I sat, I enjoyed the Bison basketball wins. But I have also found myself joining others in grumbling about the lack of leg space in a brand new building. As usual, I learned my grumbling was minimal compared to what challenges others were facing at the facility.

While my knee jammed the chair in front of me, my friends with disabilities were facing more serious challenges to enjoying the event. For example, some may have not been able to see the court during an exciting drive in an important part of the game. How in the world could this be the case in 2020? How could this have happened in a brand new multi-million dollar building?

Thankfully, places like Freedom Resource Center are here to correct those wrongs. Not only do the staff, board, and volunteers have the courage to act, they help others understand. Unfortunately, as the feature story pointed out, understanding and corrections take time.

These days I sit on KFGO radio as a talk show host. I hear from callers - our neighbors - in the community and surrounding area daily. One thing seems certain. People want to live their lives free from barriers to do the things that bring them joy. Whether that is watching a basketball game or wrestling match at the SHAC, gaining knowledge through a class, or getting to and from a retail store to shop. The ability to do all these activities should not be more difficult nor stressful for our friends and family with disabilities.

Unfortunately, barriers still exist that I’m still learning about. I don’t have a disability. I do have an older brother who has taught me so much about barriers with his disability. He has overcome so much to live a life of independence. But, as you know, circumstances and challenges are different for everyone. That is why I rely on Freedom Resource Center to better understand how we can all become more inclusive.

From where I sit, allies are still needed to help push for equality and accessibility for people with disabilities. Whether it is physical, emotional, medical, or financial barriers there is a great deal of work left to be done. With stories and outcomes similar to the ones found in the pages of this newsletter, we can take comfort knowing Freedom Resource Center is leading the way. The bottom line is they get results.

Thanks for allowing me this space in Nate’s Corner. Take care of yourself. I’ll be checking in on you soon.
What’s Wrong With This Picture?

The yellow device is a level. If you could read it, it is measuring a 3.6% slope. Turning areas of an accessible route can only have a maximum slope of 2% in any direction. Over time this concrete has settled and is out of compliance. The entire surface needs to be firm, stable and slip resistant. The dirt that has washed over the corner of the concrete does not meet these requirements.

Meet our Staff

Tom Thompson moved to Fargo 1987 and worked at Southeast Human Services, Vocational Rehabilitation, Vocational Training Center and currently at Freedom Resource Center. Tom is the Benefits Coach for the counties in Minnesota. He gathers information and puts together a comprehensive plan for those individuals who want to get back to work or who are just beginning to work. Tom recently took on the role of Community Relations Coordinator and will be working with our service area to increase awareness of Freedom Resource Center.

Travis Johnson joined Freedom Resource Center in November of 2018 and currently conducts Informed Choice interviews for subminimum wage earners. Travis spent the previous nine years helping people with disabilities to find and maintain meaningful employment. Travis recently accepted the position of Independent Living Advocate in addition to his work with sub-minimum wage earners and looks forward to assisting people to reach their goals.

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