

Handicapped parking

BY BRIAN LOCKHART

A few years ago I became acquainted with a man who attended Junior hockey games at a venue where I covered the team for the local paper.

He was the uncle of one of the players on the team and used to come out to support the team. He was a friendly guy and we chatted almost weekly about the games.

This man also had a physical handicap that made getting around rather difficult. I never really asked him about it but he mentioned it a couple of times. Apparently he was born with this type of physical handicap and did the best he could in life, even taking part in sporting events in the disabled category.

He could walk with the aid of a couple of canes, but a set of stairs would present an impassible barrier.

One night he wasn't at the game so I asked his brother ? a father of one of the players ? where he was.

Turns out he was just busy doing something else, however that conversation turned to a different matter when I made reference to the always full parking spots in the arena's reserved handicap parking area.

The father told me that they recently went to a road game in another town and when they arrived, all the handicap spaces were full and they ended parking a considerable distance away. The walk proved to be a little to much for the handicapped gentleman and they ended up carrying him through the front entrance of the arena.

At the home town arena there are eight handicapped parking spots right in front of the building. There are several more in an adjacent parking lot.

I started taking note of the parking situation. Every week at the Friday night home games those reserved handicapped spaces are filled. And yet, I don't recall ever seeing another handicapped person in the arena except for one local man who was in a wheelchair and attended occasionally.

I saw no one with a walking aid, no one hobbling along with a cane, no one on crutches. In fact I didn't see anyone who appeared to have any mobility issues ? and yet at least eight people arrived in cars and used a handicapped spot to park.

I'm well aware that some handicaps aren't necessarily visible and some people might need to take advantage of a shorter walk, so for the sake of argument let's say two of those spaces were used by people with non-visible needs.

The next week I arrived a little early and sat in the foyer of the arena just to see all the handicapped people arrive.

Of the eight cars that took those spaces, not one person in them appeared to need any kind of physical help.

In fact, most that arrived were families and the kids bounded from the car and ran to the front entrance followed by parents who seemed to be in pretty good health.

Sure enough, all but one of those vehicles had handicapped parking permits on the dashboard.

I was at this same arena the past two weekends and, sure enough, all the handicapped spots were filled.

This past weekend I decided to pay a visit to Casino Woodbine in Toronto. It was a Saturday night and the place was packed. I finally found a parking spot in an area about as far away from the entrance as you could get.

When I got near the entrance I found myself walking through a separate parking lot with extra wide parking spots. There must have been 50, if not more, handicapped parking spaces ? and every single one was filled. And again, when I went inside I didn't see a single person who seemed to need any kind of mobility assistance.

According to the Service Ontario website, a handicapped parking permit can be used only by the person to whom it is issued. If another person uses the permit it can result in a fine of up to \$5,000.

Obviously there are people misusing this system. Try parking your car in Toronto for two seconds over the meter limit and you'll get a fine by the eagle-eyed crew that patrol the streets and don't miss a trick.

However, abusing handicapped parking permits seems to go unchallenged.

I'm never a fan of seeing people get fines or tickets for minor infractions, but I think it would suit the public well if a law enforcement officer showed up at the arena one night to verify the handicapped person driving the vehicle.

My bet is there would be a lot of able-bodied people trying to explain why their deceased grandmother's name is on the permit.