

Education • Ryerson University  
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# A Flag and its Revelations

*Hidden Histories of Disability Go Public at Kickstart Festival 2010*

WHEN THE 2010 PARALYMPICS are in full swing, flags will be everywhere. Almost as much as the athletes themselves, flags will command our attention. They'll be carried with pride and expectation, waved with cheers and confidence, raised high above podiums as anthems are sounded and medals gleam.

One very large and slightly tattered Canadian flag will stand apart, draped elegantly in a luminous display case, its ample folds cradling a clutch of dog-eared pages bearing the now-obscure title, "Bill C-78, an Act to amend certain Acts with respect to persons with disabilities."

This is the flag that flew from the top of our Parliamentary Peace Tower on June 13, 1992, the day the Government of Canada passed Bill C-78 into law, extending to Canadians with disabilities rights that our fellow citizens had taken for granted for a long time.

*Abilities* readers may recall the story of this flag's journey in the hands of Canadian disability rights luminary, Jim Derksen, as told in the Spring 2007 issue. But while the flag's auspicious origins account for its historic significance, the question remains – how does this particular Canadian flag now find itself in the company of 16 grey sweatsuits, a baby's bassinet, a circus program and an IQ-testing kit?

Visitors to **Out from Under: Disability, History and Things to Remember** will find out for themselves in March when this groundbreaking and much-acclaimed exhibit is featured as part of **Kickstart Festival 2010**.

What links these disparate objects together? "Their hidden histories," says Dr. Kathryn Church, associate professor at Ryerson University in Toronto. Three years ago, she teamed up with two faculty colleagues in Ryerson's School of Disability Studies to launch a seminar focusing on Canadian disability history.

"We found ourselves restless with conventional pedagogies of teaching by telling," explains Dr. Melanie Panitch, the



**Top:** Sally Witcher from the UK Office for Disability Issues tours *Out from Under* as part of a Ministerial delegation. **Bottom:** The exhibit's bold and elegant entrance wall.

school's director. "So, instead we issued an open call, inviting participants to arrive not with their heads full of ideas but with an everyday object of their choosing – an object that had some particular resonance in relation to disabled people's history."

Church recalls, "Seeing the objects that the students brought in made our collective hair stand on end: archival photos of three women who together spent 135 years as unpaid patient labour in a psychiatric hospital; the Braille watch of a woman who was the first deaf-blind Canadian to earn a university degree; an old trunk that once carried a seven-year-old child's belongings on a one-way journey to the local 'Asylum for Idiots.' Stories simply fly out of objects like these!"

Don't miss it!

**Out From Under: Disability, History and Things to Remember** will both honour and make history when it appears at UBC's Robson Square in downtown Vancouver from March 9 to 21. The exhibit is open daily, seven days a week, and admission is free.

Accessibility features include:

- ASL, Braille and large-print versions of all exhibit texts
- Audio descriptive tours
- Replica artifact touch stations
- Plain-language audio tours

If you can't be there in person, visit [www.ofu.ryerson.ca](http://www.ofu.ryerson.ca)

As the creative collaborators uncovered those stories, a modest assortment of objects was styled into a powerfully evocative display of Canadian history, illuminated from the perspective of disabled citizens.

Each of the exhibit installations is accompanied by a short interpretive text that gently but resolutely guides viewers beyond responses too frequently associated with disability – pity, inspiration and oddity. Instead, this exhibit pays tribute to the resilience, creativity, and civic and cultural contributions of disabled Canadians. Struggles for social and political recognition, for identity, survival and remembrance come to life in the narration of a complex history in which shame and neglect figure as prominently as pride and resistance.

"Just as the 2010 Paralympics showcase the athletic contributions of disabled Canadians, **Out from Under** gives expression to the deep love of justice that is our social and cultural legacy," observes Dr. Catherine Frazee, the third member of the exhibit's curatorial trio. "Presenting this exhibit as part of the Cultural Olympiad rightly honours an historic claiming of place in the public commons, in civil society, in public history."