

Feeling Disabled

By Linda VanAken

We recently attended a wedding at a beautiful old family estate which had been converted to a modern cozy little resort. The manor house was gorgeous old gray stone, with lots of curving staircases, many unique rooms, and much character. The setting was just as gorgeous as the buildings were. The estate was nestled in among green rolling hills with lots of trees, birds and other interesting wildlife. Across the road from the manor house was a fabulous flower garden that was ablaze in glorious spring blossoms. The resort had converted not only the manor house into guest rooms, but also other outbuildings, such as the Mews and the Gardener's cottage. Because the Cottage was the *most accessible* and would house our family, we stayed there. Sounds idyllic doesn't it? However, the term accessible really wasn't in their vocabulary and I said I felt more handicapped there for that four day weekend than I had in years. Our guest room was spacious, but I could barely maneuver my scooter through the small cozy parlor in order to store it and recharge it. The large bath was a far cry from being accessible. They did have a raised toilet with grab bars. The sink was placed in the center of a high counter and anyone who had to sit in a scooter or power chair to use it would have found it a challenge to reach the sink area. Oh yes, architects really do understand the needs of people with disabilities! The shower was a 5 foot by 7 foot tiled enclosure but there were no grab bars. We tried to place two of those removable grab bars, but they would not adhere to the tile. I am at my most vulnerable when I am barefoot, without a brace or shoe, and walking on wet surfaces. Most of us understand how precarious we feel in those situations. There is no way I would attempt to stand and use my crutches to exit such an enclosure totally wet. Without my braces on it was imperative that I use my crutches all the way into the shower. I used loads of hotel towels to form a pathway so I could walk (somewhat) safely into and out of the shower enclosure. Just the act of standing from that small shower bench made me very nervous. There was nothing to grab onto and little space to push myself up. It was scary using the crutches with wet tips. I did try to wipe down the tips. Every day I felt tremendous stress using that very inaccessible shower. It was not a pleasant experience.

We ate breakfast at the Manor house. The first day I was eager to see the manor house and wanted to have my scooter so we drove up and let the valet take the car after unloading my scooter. I was able to get into the building ok, and drive down to the area where the buffet

breakfast was served. I soon realized that I had another problem; all the seating at the tables was down two steps and not a ramp was in sight. Fortunately for me, I am quite able to walk, so I could simply park my scooter and go on with the meal. But my hopes of viewing this wondrous old building went out of the window as there were steps everywhere. Again I had that depressing feeling of missing out because I was disabled. It had rained heavily the night we arrived so the grounds were just too soft and the grass a bit too high for me to attempt to drive my scooter over the rolling hills. We visited the beautifully flowering gardens and I got stuck in the packed shale walkways, so had to abandon that outing.

Large "golf" carts were provided for transporting the guests to and from the guests' quarters to the manor house. We used those the rest of the weekend, but because of the small entries to each row, I had difficulty pushing myself back up if I sat in the front or middle, so had to always climb on the back and hang on for dear life to a small U shaped handle in the middle of the seat, while making sure I didn't lose my cane and purse in the process. That was particularly harrowing when that was our transportation down the hills to the gorgeous spot for this outdoor wedding.

There was not a comfortable chair anywhere at the manor house, so the seating for the reception & breakfast was very uncomfortable. Four days of less than adequate seating resulted in my body screaming its protest for days afterwards. By the third day, all I could think of was "Won't this weekend ever end?" This should have been a glorious family event. Instead I found myself feeling isolated, uncomfortable, stressed, and often very left out. I realized afterwards that we truly have come a long way to adapting our environment to accommodate people with disabilities. I honor the people who came before me that helped enact the American's with Disabilities Act. I honor those that continue to speak up and help make changes so others are not denied access or comfort when possible. I readily understand that an old manor house cannot be converted easily for those of us using power chairs and scooters. However, there were so many areas that could have used simple solutions to make them accessible, like paved walkways, or small ramps, etc. Oh and let's not forget the grab bars in the shower stall!

May we all find more places that are accessible and find our journey full and rewarding as we travel through this time we call "life".