

Post-Polio Thoughts

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THAT OLD FEELING

It got their attention—our friend Mac wheeling along in his power chair, lugging three two-by-fours and a standard toilet stool into the City Council meeting.

He'd been there before, our friend Mac, and had made no headway trying to describe why the city government building restrooms made it impossible for people like him in wheelchairs to use those facilities.

This night he *showed* them. Plopped down his two-by-fours to square off the dimensions of a stall, arranged the toilet stool in the center, and proceeded to demonstrate, tastefully, why this does not work—and then made clear what needed to be done. By the end of Mac's show, he had a unanimous vote for change, and the city government building had accessible restrooms within weeks.

Lesson One in Making the ADA Work For You.

But that was 20 years ago. Enthusiasm ran high among those of us with disabilities back then. We saw a world of freedom beckoning. Suddenly there were buildings we could get into, pathways we could sail through, reachable drinking fountains. We spread the word, touted the universal importance of accessibility. We talked with city planning directors, property owners, parents watching children frolic in the park. We shared our vision, and it became theirs. We showed them how—and why. What spectacular results!

But time marched on. As with other initiatives to great social change, after outstanding bursts of accomplishment, efforts began to wane, and today public response to the ADA remains "a work in progress."

A local polio survivor serves on a committee dealing with housing units being built in a retirement community. "Management" tells her they want to comply with ADA regulations. Only, apparently, not too often—a pitiful one in fifty of the independent living apartments currently under construction is accessible. Could they possibly believe that those of us with disabilities cannot also be independent?

They say budget concerns cause ADA cuts; they can adapt later if they need to. Besides, they say, people are turned off by apartments that look as if the purchasers, themselves, might be disabled some day.

Indeed, the retirement village's resort-like ads project, through appealing photos, the image of a mecca for active aging folks. The relatively affluent. The non-disabled. Nary a wheelchair, scooter, or walker in sight. Can it be this describes the typical retiree?

Who are "the disabled," anyway? Our fathers, putting up with debilitating arthritis all these years? Niece Amy, living with MS since she was 35? Beloved Uncle Ralph, using a walker after recovery from a stroke? Our sweet old neighbor, still baking cookies as she did when we were kids, in spite of her frequent need for oxygen? Thousands of veterans returning home scarred and maimed from defending us in wars? These people couldn't possibly be independent?

Surely we have not become so outrageously biased as to suggest relegating them all to an invisible society. Who today would be offended by the sight of a wheelchair? A brace? An artificial limb? Are there actually those who do not accept people who are disabled as viable members of a community?

Let's find out. Get people's attention again. Let's remind them of the tune they danced to twenty years ago when they began to embrace the ADA. The kindness in their hearts. The way they felt when they made room for one more imperfect soul in their world. Let's start shouting from the rooftops as we did before. Only this time the message is: WE'RE STILL HERE!

Let's see how it goes. I'm betting on *us*.

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Source: Post-Polio Health International (www.post-polio.org)