

Disabled in Denver: My Adventures as a Temporarily Disabled Person

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*As a regular contributor to the journal *Information Outlook*, I was invited to be an official blogger for the Special Libraries Association Denver conference. This article ran on that website the summer of 2007.

I recently watched one of those news shorts where they dressed up a slim newswoman in a fat suit and sent her out in the world to see if she was treated any differently. The unfortunate part of this scenario is that they also gave her ugly clothes and a strikingly bad wig. I'd have some pretty horrid self esteem too if I were her, and I wasn't at all surprised that passers by treated her like a circus freak. And yet, here I am several sizes larger than the "fat" newswoman, and I've never received that kind of response from anyone. I have no doubt that is entirely due to the fact I am in excellent shape, dress well, and carry myself with pride.

And so it was that I recently became part of the disabled population when I tore the meniscus in my right knee. I've been telling people that it was from skiing the Green Mountains of Vermont and getting mauled by a grizzly mama bear, but not too many people have bought that one. It was in fact from working out, and it does hurt like a bear in any case. I'm wearing a knee brace, and crutching it around. While on a recent trip to Denver for the Special Libraries Association yearly conference I rented a motorized scooter to get around the many miles of downtown, not to mention the gigantic Denver Convention Center where the event was held. Because I work in special education, I figured this would be the perfect opportunity to observe how people with disabilities were treated, not unlike how our erstwhile newswoman was treated while in the fat suit. Now I will offer a little disclaimer here because I know quite well that I am not actually disabled, and this is a short term thing. But to the extent that I could observe the experience, I thought I'd share what I learned.

First I'd like to say that I found my experience nearly 100% positive. Now, I will also say that this is at least in part because I was experiencing Denver as a tourist, staying in the lovely Adams Mark hotel where my company was paying a pretty penny to have me treated well in one of their handicapped accessible rooms. That said, the hotel was accessible in every way, as was the city, and the Denver Convention Center. I didn't have an ounce of trouble getting in or out of any place in between here and there. I also visited a number of stores, and while the somewhat narrow aisles in some of them may have caused me to bump into a number of walls, doors, and shelves – I'm pleased to say that I did not run into any children or small animals. In fact, the children found me particularly entertaining as my "car" was just their size! The only near miss I had was when I was driving around the right side of a woman who started to turn right just as I was coming around her, and it turned out that she had a patch on her right eye and was also deaf in her right ear. We both had a big laugh about that one, remembering the joke about the deaf person trying to communicate in sign language with a blind person.

The scooter, or bumper car as I like to think of it, sped rather faster than the average walker so I made excellent time from one place to another, and I found that pedestrians were uniformly kind and respectful as I buzzed around them, smiling and excusing myself when I surprised them from one side or the other. Many of them kindly opened doors for me and helped me out when things flew off the scooter unexpectedly. Although a few people looked at me with some particular interest or possibly with confusion, I was never actually sure if it was because of my "disability" or just because I was in their

way, or maybe just because of my charm and good looks. Putting myself in their position, I think of all the times I'm woolgathering myself and don't smile and recognize people who look at me, and so they probably think I'm myself thinking negative thoughts about them when in fact I'm just into my own world.

I have spent some time considering that it was fairly evident that I was temporarily disabled, and that most people can relate to having hurt their knee, ankle, or whatever. I heard many stories this week from fellow survivors of knee surgery. And, not unlike when you buy a red car and all of a sudden start to notice all the red cars on the road, for the first time I noticed the remarkable number of people on scooters, wheelchairs, crutches, and canes walking and limping around me. I most definitely never noticed all of these people before. With awareness thus awakened, I nodded and smiled at them all as we now shared a little bit of common sensibility. I also recognized that there was a bit of a continuum, in that clearly I was not part of the true disabled community, but only temporarily participating in the most superficial of ways. I came to appreciate the challenges of being in a scooter and not being able to reach things in the store or see things in a vendor's display at the conference that were at the normal eye level of a standing person. I expected to be a bit ignored as a supposed disabled person, but in fact found that I gathered more attention than most, as I was especially recognizable in my little scooter and got to know quite a few vendors at the expo personally. Several people at the event also were able to locate me easily because of my mode of transportation as well, which I found useful. This said, I also know that there is a difference in the American consciousness between disabilities that are physically based such as a paraplegic, and those that are mentally based, the latter which generally seem to make observers far more uncomfortable. There is no doubt that my confident and outgoing attitude made the same difference for me as a "disabled" person as it does for me as a plus sized gal.

So what shall I take home to my Green Mountains and that grizzly mama bear about all this? I will say that I look forward terribly to being my healthy self again, and have a particular appreciation for the vitality of my body in general. Had I not been as strong and flexible as I am, I would not have been able to handle the contortions required in all of this with the ease that I have. Having to stand on my left leg for long periods, crutch along using the biceps of my left arm, and reach the floor easily without bending my knees has been a blessing that I hadn't appreciated prior to this. I have Jazzercise to thank for all of that. It is with this appreciation, and a big thank you to the helpful and friendly folk of Denver, that I return to Vermont with a smile on my face and a slowly healing knee.

REFERENCES

Jenson Medical (rented the motorized scooter)
303-751-7292
*Great service and very friendly!