

Chapter 7

Making a Difference

Spending the Day with the ADA



George H. W. Bush signs the ADA.

I didn't let on how hard it was to push the wheelchair up the hill because I didn't want to make her feel guilty. It was a hot, humid day and the few patches of shade gave little relief. We were both soaked with sweat.

As committee co-chairs, we were scouting locations for an all-day conference for 250 people. One of our top priorities was accessibility.

My co-chair contracted polio when she was a baby and had used crutches and leg braces her whole life. In familiar environments, the braces and crutches did the job. In the unfamiliar environment that we were about to enter, she wanted to take her wheelchair.

After a phone interview with the facilities manager of a local college campus, we decided to take a look. I picked her up at her house, where she was waiting for me, sitting in her wheelchair. The crutches were in her lap. She also had the foot pieces for the chair detached for easy loading. The sun bore down as I cheerily opened my trunk to deposit the chair.

She wheeled out to the car and, after I handed her the crutches, she stood up, locked her braces, and balanced herself. As she told me how to collapse the chair, she said it weighed only 32 pounds. I took a deep breath, lowered down so I could lift with my legs, not my back, and hoisted the unwieldy mass of metal into my trunk.

When we arrived at the campus, the process was repeated in reverse. The trunk opened, the wheelchair hoisted, foot pieces placed, crutches in the trunk, braces released, a cushion placed, co-chair in her chair. She held my briefcase, and I pushed the wheelchair over asphalt, a surface I had never thought much about until I encountered it in this fashion. Walking over it is easy, rolling over it is difficult.

When we got to the entrance of the administration office, a custodian opened the door for us. I rolled over one of those rubber mats that are great for removing water from shoes but stopping a wheelchair cold. I persevered and got us over that hurdle, only to encounter a thick carpet. I pushed harder.

The next hour included a harrowing trip up a ramp and through the kitchen to the dining room to talk to the caterer about lunch. We rolled into the bathroom and discovered it didn't have any stalls to accommodate wheelchairs. The classrooms were accessible only by stairs. When I went to view them, I had to park my co-chair under a tree while I checked them out.

Because so many other things about the location were right for the conference, we decided to book it. The coordinator was a congenial fellow, so we had a discussion with him about accessibility and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), now celebrating its 10th anniversary. He said he'd talk to the administration about the bathrooms.

We were thoroughly soaked with perspiration as we left the campus. I put the chair back in the trunk, retrieved the crutches, and got us both back in the car, then cranked up the air conditioner and cooled us on the way home.

I dropped my co-chair off, gratefully unloaded the wheelchair, and left her heading toward the front door. I returned to my able-bodied life, free from barriers and frustration. She remained in her cumbersome world, working harder just to get through the day, perhaps wondering "why."

I can hear, see, feel, walk, and run pretty fast, if I have to. After spending those few hours with a disabled person, I realized how utterly oblivious most of us are to our faculties until they are lost. The ADA caused controversy when it was passed a decade ago. These days the sight of a ramp in front of a building or a huge stall at the back of the restroom is commonplace.

The able-bodied barely notice, but the disabled can now go to places they never dreamed of going before. They can catch a bus, see a play, and land a job for which they are supremely qualified, with a little assistance. "ADA compliant" is not just a phrase, it is a reality we all can live with.