MS and Accessibility Troubles

by ABIGAIL BUDD

Getting Around with Mobility Issues

According the Social Model of Disability, it’s the way society is organized that causes disability, rather than the physical impairments disabled people have. I can’t walk well or far but I have a mobility scooter to help solve the problem, making getting about easier – except when confronted with the numerous barriers society throws in my way.

It would seem that society and our environment mainly caters for young, fit, able-bodied people, which is frustrating considering our aging population as well as the infirm, injured and disabled. The model looks at removing barriers and there are laws in place to force developers to think about this when planning new developments in towns and cities.

Old vs New

I have learned quickly that any new building will be gloriously accessible but older buildings will not.

There’s a restaurant I go to, for example, that seems to have thought of everything. The entrance door is wide and level so there are no steps to negotiate, something that's impossible on a scooter. The tables are wider apart than normal, meaning I can “drive” in without upsetting tables or unintentionally pulling drinks and plates down in my wake.

The bathrooms are upstairs but there’s a specially designed lift to take me upstairs to the fabulously accessible disabled toilet. I can drive into the toilet and use the handrails provided to get on and off the scooter easily. Whenever I go to this restaurant I can drink as many glasses of wine as I like (and I generally do!) without worrying about how I’ll be able to get to the bathroom!

On the other hand, I was on holiday with my family recently and we wanted to go to a renowned restaurant nearby. I phoned in advance to find out how accessible it was and they were quite happy for me to use my scooter inside, but pointed out there were seven steps up to the front door. These steps had no handrails at all, and my husband and brother-in-law had to lift my scooter up the stairs while I struggled up practically on all fours!

Once inside I discovered that the bathrooms were up a further flight of three stairs (with no handrails) so I had to “park” my scooter in a corridor, blocking access for everybody else while I was helped up the stairs. This was humiliating and stressful but as the manager pointed out, “It’s an old building so we’re not obliged to have disabled access.”

I accept this argument, but putting in handrails doesn’t require any major refurbishment or disruption and would help a great many people, like the elderly and infirm as well as the disabled. My brother-in-law was outraged at their attitude and exclaimed, “You’d think they don’t want disabled people in their restaurant!”

This is certainly the way I feel sometimes – like a nuisance not to be seen outdoors so people don't have to think about it.

Next page: getting around outside, and planning ahead.

Getting Around Outside

Curbs are another problem. I've been caught out so many times when I come to the end of a sidewalk and there is no dropped curb to allow me to cross a road.

I've even had to leave my children while I drive all the way back along the sidewalk to find a driveway to drive down and then back along the road to pick them up again! This can be harrowing on a mobility scooter with no lights or mirrors.

However, there's a newly developed district in the centre of the city where I live that caters for disability. There are no curbs, making trundling along on my scooter so easy! It has plenty of disabled parking and all the shops and restaurants are level so there are no barriers preventing access.

There is a new, award-winning library, too, with lifts and disabled toilets, so I can spend all day enjoying myself with no barriers.

Planning Ahead

The Social Model of Disability looks at ways of removing barriers that restrict choices for disabled people, but that would largely mean knocking down all the existing buildings and infrastructure and starting again.

What a shame it would be to lose all our heritage and history! Being English, history and culture is part of who I am so I'm resigned to the fact that some places aren't going to be accessible to me due to my mobility issues.

But that doesn't mean I have to enjoy myself less or shut myself away, it just means I need to plan more than the average person and chose venues and destinations that are accessible. It's my responsibility to phone in advance and make plans rather than leaving it to chance and being disappointed, humiliated or worse!

I've just booked a holiday, for example, and used a company in the UK that specializes in providing accessible accommodation. I have a downstairs bedroom with a wet-room, and the cottage and garden is fully accessible. I'll be able to trundle around with a glass of wine – with the only barrier being the great British weather!