

I Walk, I See, I Hear

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For years, 40 to be exact, my body has functioned in a way that is defined as normal in today's society. At least I thought it did. Although I've had two procedures on my left knee and nerves removed from both feet due to nerve damage, I am able to walk for hours at Six Flags without a problem. With the aid of bifocal lenses, I can see with 20/20 vision. And if I sit at the front of the classroom or church auditorium, I can hear just fine.

At least I thought my body was functioning “normally.” That is until I started researching the hospitality tour spots that had been chosen for the STC's 50th Annual International Conference in Dallas, Texas. I discovered that there was one part of me that hadn't functioned “normally” until this spring—my observation skills.

For 40 years I had taken no notice of the locations of ramps in public buildings, or the height or number of stairs present, or if pay phones had instructions in Braille. It never occurred to me that a sitting area with 4 steps and no alternate ramp could mean the difference between a person with chronic fatigue syndrome being able to rest or having to walk another 20 feet to a sitting area with no steps. I never noticed if a sink in a public restroom was accessible or not for a person using a wheelchair or scooter. My, how things have changed for me since January!

I took on the challenge of writing the Special Needs SIG's *Conference Guide for People with Special Needs* for the Society's 50th International Conference in Dallas as a Mass Communication/Technical Writing internship project. What I learned about accessibility, the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, far outweighs the credit hours I will receive at the end of the semester.

When I began making trips to the Wyndham Anatole Hotel, the DFW Airport, and the Hospitality Tour Sites I had a very abbreviated list of “things to investigate.” On my initial list I

had restrooms, parking lots, signage, and stairs and elevators. After my second or third stop, I realized that there were so many more things that needed to be investigated. I added to my list things like desk height, visual obstructions, restroom plumbing, slopes, thresholds, and the weight of doors. With each visit I added something new to my list of observances. I learned that there are companies and organizations that make their establishments ADA-compliant to the *letter* of the law and there are those who take it a step further and meet the *spirit* of the law, by trying to make their establishments user-friendly for everyone.

I investigated tours for several weeks and made multiple stops at some of the places on my tour list. As we are now finishing the manual and getting it ready for the conference attendees to use, I realize there are probably many more things I could have investigated and included.

This project was intended to be a learning experience for me. What I learned is twofold:

- 1) Those of us who don't have to think about stairs, restrooms, room noise, elevator location, distances from one room to another, and so on, in some ways have a greater need than people who depend on a wheelchair or a hearing-aid. Our need is to have our eyes opened to the fact that the letter of the law isn't good enough when it comes to ADA compliance.
- 2) The Special Needs SIG is of vital importance to the Society for Technical Communication and to the business world in general. Technical communicators are the ones who can help companies and organizations realize the need to make their establishments step over the boundary from the *letter* of the law to the *spirit* of the law.