

ADVENTURES LEAVING YOUR COMFORT ZONE

I'm quite fascinated by the assumptions people make of people with challenges, of which 99% are well intentioned. Most people have no idea and could never imagine themselves in my position.

I was incredibly fortunate to have a lovely carer every Tuesday (and she still works with me after 17 years!) who patiently encouraged me to transfer myself in and out of a normal car. For the first four years I would not leave the house – I felt safe and secure in my own home and thought that I should be happy with that. I was surrounded by a co-dependent yet loving partner and family. I was treated as though I need protection all the time – protection from what? I needed to be allowed the 'dignity of risk'. This is where my passion about access comes from.

I left my comfort zone, safe in the knowledge that most places would be accessible and to my delight most places are, with the exception being private dwellings.

Just being invited to attend a meeting in the city can be fraught with obstacles. You try to do the right thing, phone the office and ask about accessibility. The young 'upright' person at the front desk treats you as someone who has just asked for directions to Mars! Generally people do not understand how a 3cms high ridge in the floor can prevent a wheelchair user from accessing a building or room - never mind a parent with a pram or an elderly person.

I'm often asked – "Don't you always have a carer with you?" Well no, I don't afford to be able to pay someone to be with me all the time – I rely on the kindness of strangers (luckily I live in Australia). I like time for 'me' – I certainly don't need another person to be with me 24/7. I like to be included, I make allowances for people's homes but public buildings and places have an obligation to be accessible.

As for using lifts when you can't reach the number for the floor you need or pressing the button for a lift when it is a bank of four possible lifts/elevators. Invariably it will be the furthest lift from where you are sitting and the door closes before you get in the lift – resulting in you having to go back to press the button again! In a hotel in New York City,

it took me 30 minutes to get from the hotel lobby to my room on the 4th floor!



Whether you rely on mobility aids or you are blind or deaf or non verbal – you are first and foremost a human being and therefore have rights.

Meriel Stanger

July 2014 Brisbane

mstanger@powerup.com.au