

# Awesome aliases



## Why I named my mobility devices

by Ardra Shephard

According to some not-so-scientific stats I got off the interwebs, more than 25% of people name their cars. We trust our rides with our lives, so it feels reasonable to humanize the machines we'd like to believe have a vested interest in our well-being. It's a comforting concept, if not exactly a correct one. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but would we trust Siri if she wasn't a she at all, but simply—and more accurately—plain, old artificial intelligence?



**Ardra Shephard didn't name her first borrowed cane, but she quickly came around to the idea.**

Photo by Alkan Emin

It's not just because the robots are taking over and we feel the need to get on their good side that we find ourselves slapping "Hello, My Name Is" stickers on cars. From boats to plants to pets to semi-inflated volleyballs, we humans have a long history of naming the things we value most.

After all, our possessions are part of our personal brands.

When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and optic neuritis in my early 20s, I was told that because of my significant vision loss, I was no longer a legal driver.

I'd never have a car of my own to name, but that didn't mean I'd be immune to a lifetime of anthropomorphizing my stuff. I'd already been calling my period Brenda since circa Beverly Hills 90210. My dependence on my heating blanket has long led me to refer to it as Linus, and more recently, the one wiry chin hair that, despite my best efforts, promises to be the most consistent relationship of my life has earned the nickname "Harry." Naturally, it makes sense that my arsenal of assistive devices all have awesome aliases, but it wasn't always so.

### **Seeing aids as the enemy**

My first cane wasn't one I'd even commit to owning, let alone labeling. I'd borrowed it from a friend, telling myself it was temporary. I was determined to remain ill-at-ease with something that made my illness so easy to ID. I had zero affection for that first cane, and if I'd been inclined to give it a name at all, it would have been a mean one, like Stick-Face. I was afraid

of what MS could do to me, of course, but compounding that fear was how I'd been conditioned to believe mobility aids themselves to be the enemy.

Ironically, the first such aid I found worthy of a proper moniker was the most extreme one I've acquired to date: a convertible rollator/transport chair I'd been anxious to own back when I couldn't see it as anything more than a symbol of my decline. Despite my skepticism, I soon found myself gushing about how it moved from rollator to push-chair, like a real-life Transformer. My machine had the characteristics of a superhero, and I started comparing it to Optimus Prime. I realized that despite the very real grief I was going through, I was proud of my possession. The nickname stuck, and before I knew it, I had named my mobility aid.



**Ardra Shephard says Instagram is full of examples of people who have embraced the name game.**

As original as I thought I was, I soon learned that fake-statistically speaking, people are naming their medical devices at even higher rates than they are naming their cars. Instagram is littered with examples of people who've embraced the name game, providing powerful proof that it's healthy to make friends with the tools that do the work our bodies should be capable of but aren't. Tagging my transport chair gives it a personality that goes beyond the medical, and the impact of seeing mobility aids in this empowered context can give those struggling to adjust the courage to accept mobility aids, and the confidence to reject the stigma with which they are too often associated.

### **Putting help in a positive light**

When it comes to disability, it can be especially beneficial to figure out a more personal way to identify our devices than by defaulting to the generic titles that come loaded with negative connotations. It's hard for me to even say the word "wheelchair" without it getting caught in my throat. For better or worse, language has the power to redirect our thinking, to shape our perception. Where the accepted language around disability, and particularly wheelchairs, consists of phrases like "being confined to" or "ending up in," it may sound radical to suggest that mobility aids are not, in and of themselves, the thing that is scary. Mobility aids only

exist to help, not hinder; to liberate rather than restrict.

Baptizing my devices not only helps me frame my need for them in a positive light, it tells the world what my attitude toward them is: that I think of my mobility aids favorably, and by extension, that is how I see myself. The world may stigmatize disability and the tools we need to thrive, but elevating our devices to high-status heroes is a tiny act of rebellion that rejects this toxic thinking, that refuses to buy into the fear and insists we are not tragedies. We are simply people who move differently in the world.

So, have you named your mobility aid?

**Ardra Shephard is a Toronto-based writer whose blog “Tripping On Air” provides an irreverent insider scoop about MS.**

See more at [trippingonair.com](http://trippingonair.com).

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