

The Long Walk to the Coffee Shop



My rollator walker is my freedom. There's no question about that. It allows me to observe the world while I'm walking instead of constantly looking down to avoid pebbles or cracks that might (and do) send me reeling.

Liberating as it is, the rollator has its drawbacks. It's big and bulky, and it's forever a challenge to figure out where to stow the dang thing when I'm at a concert or in a restaurant. And when I'm walking down the sidewalk, I'm often either parting crowds or zig-zagging to get out of people's way.

Still, I'm rarely without it and until I retired a couple of years ago, I took it to work every day. And because I worked in a government agency that investigates employment discrimination complaints, I knew my boss and co-workers understood that the device was an accommodation protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

But as those of us with MS and other disabilities know, once we get in the door, we can still be isolated from the daily workplace rhythm. For example, in the latter years of my career, my co-workers started taking daily morning walks to a nearby coffee shop. They walked three long blocks down a gentle hill in heavy traffic. None of the others had apparent disabilities, and they filled the sidewalk and moved quickly. For safety reasons, as well as the knowledge that I would always end up walking far behind them, I didn't join these daily coffee fests.

It was always somewhat awkward when I ran into the able-bodied "mob" and saw the forced smiles and downcast eyes, especially on the part of my boss. But I could live with that. The problem was when I began to realize that these daily strolls had sort of been taking the place of staff meetings, and people often used the time to discuss work-related issues. Sometimes

those items were important, and I would only learn of them through casual remarks made by others during the day. In addition, as everyone who works in an office knows, these activities can create and deepen connections that are invaluable in the course of a career.

I tried to hint a few times to my boss that the situation made me feel left out, but nothing changed. And after all, what was it I really wanted—to tell them they couldn't go or that they had to walk slower during the times I joined them? Absolutely not!

As with most workplace accommodations, a little thought and sensitivity could have changed everything—they could have had regular staff meetings and other “accessible” ways for staff to get together. That's what I told them during my retirement party, and my understanding is that this is exactly what they have started doing.

I won't pretend for a moment that this was as important as the other workplace battles I fought—such as finding a system to make sure everyone gets down the stairs in the event of a fire. But I'm glad that the next person with mobility limitations that works there will not have to go through this daily indignity. I guess that's what it means to change the world one “step” at a time.