

# Help wanted



## **I'm learning to let others lend me a hand.**

**by Mike Knight**

It was a perfect sunny August day. My wife, Michelle, and I had joined friends to watch a soccer game, and in single file we were climbing the steep, narrow steps of an older stadium in Indianapolis.

I had yet to be diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. But it was getting harder for me to lift my right foot off the ground when I walked, and the problems that was causing were growing more apparent.

A month before the soccer game, during the Fourth of July holiday, my right leg had temporarily quit on me, making it impossible to get up from the chair I was sitting on. Over the years, I'd seen four or five neurologists as well as other specialists for seemingly disparate problems, including thyroid issues, sleeplessness and restless legs, and what we all thought were back and gait problems caused by running 30 to 50 miles a week. But my difficulty on the stadium steps made it obvious that something was seriously wrong, something far beyond a sore back or an unbalanced gait.

The old stadium steps had no railings. Trailing Michelle and our friends up the crowded staircase, I suddenly could no longer climb the stairs. I was stuck, alone and helpless.

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. What was likely only two or three seconds felt like much longer. I looked from side to side, meeting faces that recognized that something serious was happening to me. I could see that they were confused and maybe even scared—exactly how I felt. Michelle, realizing I was no longer with the group, turned

back to find me. When our eyes met, I saw the shock on her face.

### **A helping hand**

Suddenly, I felt someone take hold of my arm and gently but surely help me climb the stairs until I was in my seat. It was a beer vendor, a younger guy probably in his late 20s or early 30s. I tried to thank him, but he just shook his head and brushed it off. And then he gave me a beer.

That was in 2013, the year I was diagnosed with MS. Since then, MS has progressed slowly up the right side of my body. Now I need a cane, and my right hand barely works. My declining capacity has presented innumerable opportunities for friends, family, co-workers and complete strangers to help me. And more and more, I am not just looking for that help, I'm embracing it.



Photo courtesy of Mike Knight

I am now 57 years old. I have held a job since I was 12 years old, missing barely more than a couple months of work in all that time—until April 2016, when I left my job to go on disability. Men my age were taught to fend for ourselves, to be self-sufficient and independent. In many ways, a man's self-reliance is a measure of his success—or lack thereof.

At first I struggled to admit to myself that I was disabled, that there were things I couldn't do any longer. Household chores and yard work, having the energy necessary to manage an incredibly demanding job, simply going shopping with my wife—all had become significantly harder. MS forced me to re-examine what self-reliance means to me.

I don't ever want to see the look of fear in Michelle's eyes again, so I've made it my "job" to figure out how to manage my life and my disease. Accepting my limitations and knowing that I may need to ask someone for help as part of my daily life has simply become a part of that job.

And in a funny way, I've learned that I'm part of a bigger, perhaps more important social contract, one in which I can play a pivotal role even while I'm its beneficiary. According to Psychology Today, helping others gives us a "helper's high" and increases our sense of self-worth while delivering many other physiological benefits, too.

I've come to realize that by seeking and accepting help, I'm fulfilling my side of this contract: I'm available to be helped. My benefactors get a good feeling from helping me. Me? I get people who open doors when I can't, who grab too-full coffee cups from me before I spill them, who clear plates for me before I try to do it myself and before I stubbornly perform an awkward dance while they watch, breath held, to see what accident I'm about to cause.

If not for MS, I'm not sure I'd be aware enough to recognize this powerful social contract we share, let alone its beauty. Whether we're the helper or the helped, the world is a significantly better place when we accept it, engage in it and celebrate it. Who knows? There might even be a free beer in it for you. And that's certainly worth celebrating, too!

**Mike Knight is a freelance writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was diagnosed with MS in December 2013.**