

# Widening my world



## **My attitude toward public transit changed along with my disease.**

by **Marsha Michaels**

Everyone who is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis experiences it somewhat differently. I had mostly benign symptoms—tingling and electric-like sensations—for 20 years.

Then, when I turned 42, spasticity attacked my legs. The stiffness started slowly. One day I could skip, the next day it was as if weights were wrapped around my legs—and they kept getting heavier the farther I walked. I started tripping, losing enough clearance for a crack on the street, let alone a curb. Within minutes I went from the feeling of carrying a 5-pound weight to one of carrying a 25-pound weight. My legs would give out from fatigue. I had to find a chair to rest and renew.

Over the next decade the progression took hold, and my legs didn't renew as they once did. I used a cane, a walker or a mobility scooter, depending on the activity I was engaged in, to continue living my full life.

Eventually, I started using all the mass transportation options available to people with disabilities in San Francisco, the city where I live. But this took me years. At first, I relied on a parking "spirit" that was very dependable when I willed it to find a space close to my destination. After years of this behavior, I realized my life was becoming boxed in by depending so much on close parking spaces. "I need to get braver" became my mantra, and I was determined to try public transportation.

For my first experience on BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit, San Francisco's subway system) I asked a friend to accompany me while I rode on my scooter. I discovered that BART is very accessible, with working elevators at every stop. I realized at once what I had been missing.

My world widened immediately. I'm now able to get to continuing education courses, which are held downtown in a building that connects to one of the best shopping malls in our city. I am able to reach all the museums I love and have lunch with friends. I could never park close enough to walk to such venues, so discovering how to use BART not only conquered my fears, but also eliminated my concerns about parking fees or fines.



**Marsha Michaels, at the Louvre museum in Paris, uses public transportation when she travels.** Photo courtesy of Marsha Michaels

Strangely, when I'm on my mobility scooter or with my walker, not one of my friends pays any attention to my mode of movement. It never interrupts our conversation or activity. I know my lack of mobility does not define who I am.

Eventually, I also came to realize that all our bus systems have ramps for travelers with disabilities. As I gathered the courage to expand my outings where the underground does not take me, I found the drivers on our city buses very helpful. I explained that I'm new to the system, and a driver showed me exactly how to maneuver my scooter into a specified area for safety, which button to press when I want to exit and how the seat belt works.

I'm still amazed at the cordiality of all the passengers as they move their feet out of my way. I'm fascinated by the riders, and on one particular trip I was quite surprised to hear the

clucking of a chicken riding home in a shopping bag with its owner. I looked to a young woman and she nodded to me—confirmation that I was not imagining the poultry passenger that would be dinner for her family. This is San Francisco. This is my life, filled with adventure, because I refuse to be homebound.

**Marsha Michaels lives in San Francisco. She had her first MS symptom in 1970, and was diagnosed in 1985.**

For more information on mobility and accessibility, visit [nationalMSsociety.org/mobility](https://nationalMSsociety.org/mobility).