

Frightnight
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Abstract: At some point in the life of every disabled person, discrimination will be experienced in one form or another. Sometimes that discrimination may take the form of something minor like cutting in line in front of a blind person or talking to a paraplegic as though he/she was a child. At other times the discrimination is more serious: preventing access to a public event or establishment, or harassing them into leaving. On October 27, 2003, I was harassed into leaving a public event, an elaborate haunted house, because I am blind. After several minutes of harassment, instead of fighting my way inside, I decided to leave. I still question whether or not that was the correct decision, but I felt compelled to share my story with others so if they have a similar experience, perhaps they will be more prepared to make their own decision.

Key Words: discrimination, blind, harassment

“How ya doing bud?” he asked as he walked by, patting me on the arm. From the deep resonance of his voice, he sounded like a big guy.

“All right,” I replied and waited for his instructions. I was sitting in a group of seven people waiting to enter the haunted house at the Waikiki Shell. My friend Tasha and I had been talking about it for days. We hadn’t been to a haunted house since we were kids, and on the drive over we were laughing and shivering like high schoolers.

The man started telling the group what to expect. There would be a lot of large stairs and a lot of low places where we would have to duck. He pointed the flashlight at me, the light glowing off of my cane, and said, “Especially you.” I smiled and nodded. For one thing, I’m six foot eight, so I’m used to ducking through doorways and dodging ceiling fans. For another, I’m blind. Well, not completely blind, but close enough. I still have some sight at the periphery of my vision, but I carry a cane and borrow an occasional shoulder when walking through unfamiliar territory.

“We’re together,” I said, gesturing toward Tasha. “She’ll help me through.”

“This is a dangerous place,” he said, and I couldn’t help but wonder why anyone would create a public event that was dangerous—especially an event where there was sure to be children. The flashlight beam moved from me to Tasha. “You did see the sign out front, right? Enter at your own risk.” Tasha shook her head. He turned to the group. “Okay all you people hear me telling this guy that he’s entering at his own risk. This is a dangerous place, and we’re not responsible for anything that might happen.” I cringed. Was this guy for real? I understood his concern, but why was he involving everybody else? Did he want witnesses?

“Don’t worry,” I said, “No lawsuits.”

Finally I was out of the spotlight. He told the group that we needed a leader, and asked for a volunteer. One of the group members said, “I want him,” and gestured to me. I laughed and said “At your own risk pal.” And the mood began to lighten.

He handed the flashlight to Tasha. “You be the leader.”

She handed the flashlight back. “I can’t lead these people and help my friend at the same time.”

“Then you two need to leave. Go back to the ticket counter and try to get your money back.” I thought, “Leave? This guy was kicking us out?” Tasha calmly explained to him that she could guide me, but not the rest of the group.

“You know,” he said, again pointing the flashlight at me, “I don’t know why they even sold you a ticket. Why did you even come here in the first place? You’re blind.”

My arms were trembling and my face was hot. I had two choices: I could either stand up and tell this guy off, or I could leave. I considered sticking around, but by that point the fun was gone. Trying to remain calm, I turned to my friend and said, “Let’s go.” On the way out, Tasha made a point of telling the ticket takers and those at the ticket counters what had just happened. We were met with silence. There were no apologies. Were they shocked? Were they embarrassed? Or were they silently wondering what a blind guy was doing at a haunted house.

Indeed, what was a blind guy doing at a haunted house? To me, the answer is obvious: to have fun. Of course I wouldn’t experience the event on the same level as a sighted person; I would experience the event on different levels. I still have other senses, and when I’m with a friend, they usually describe the visual things. People are often perplexed that I enjoy movies, theater, baseball games. There’s more to a movie than just spectacle. There’s more to a play or baseball game than just action. There’s a universe of sounds: laughing, talking, the crack of the bat, and the excited cheers of those sitting around me. There’s a garden of aromas: the warm buttery smell of popcorn, the sharp tang of mustard on hot dogs, and hot, crispy French fries. These may not be experiences most would consider fun, but I do.

Everyone has the right to participate in society, and if they want to participate, they should be encouraged, not shamed. There’s no shame in wanting to enjoy life. Organizers of public events need to understand that society consists of many people with disabilities, and these people need to be considered when events are being organized. Arrangements should be made to allow them to participate. It’s no fun to have someone tell you that you’re not welcome because of a physical attribute, something which one has no control over. A person with a disability is not an alien, not a creature from another planet, not subhuman or less worthy of dignity and respect than any other person. The bottom line is that people with disabilities are people, and the only thing separating the abled from the disabled is a split second: the crunch of metal in an intersection, a slip on wet concrete, a misjudged dive in shallow water and your life could change forever.

Disabilities are an issue of civil rights. The ADA has been in effect for nearly fourteen years now, making it illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of their physical ability, or lack [thereof]. With a little assistance and ingenuity, a person with a physical impairment can overcome any obstacle. Just a few years ago, a gentleman who is totally blind climbed to the top of Mt. Everest. As the immortal philosopher John Lennon once said, “There are no problems, only solutions.”

The haunted house at the Waikiki Shell was a public event, and I’m a member of the public. I should not have been bullied and made to feel stupid for wanting to join in. Was he wrong for his concerns? Absolutely not. It was perfectly reasonable for an employee of a major event to check in with me and ask if I knew the risks. The problem was that even after I made it clear that I knew the risks and was willing to go on, he continued to bully me, even at one point questioning why the ticket sellers had let me in. He put the spotlight on me and kept it there, embarrassing me in front of a group of

people... I guarantee you that if someone talked to him the way he talked to me, he would have belted them. For the most part, this is an issue of communication and respect, and not so much intent; however, I did certainly get the feeling that he wanted me gone.

Did I do the right thing? Should I have told him where to go? Should I have stormed up to the counter and demanded to see the manager? Would any of that have improved anything? Who knows? I did what I did. I'm not a hostile or confrontational person, but I feel it is important to speak out against discrimination wherever it may be lurking, for one day it may be lurking for you.

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