



Sue Redding

more year, Chris acquired an interpreter. The ability to communicate with the other kids transformed his high school experience. He became a popular student and an accomplished mime. While still in high school, he won the Showcased Performer Award as a mime specialist for the Oregon Thespian State Conference for two consecutive years.

At 19 years old, Chris joined the Northwest Theatre of the Deaf. He came out at that time. He is a past president of the NWTDD board of directors. Two years ago the company produced *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Chris performed in the leading role of Valentin, an Argentinian political rebel sharing a prison cell with a gay man named Molina. Chris said he and Valentin were in parallel situations—he as a deaf person who has been oppressed by hearing, and Valentin as a person who was oppressed by his government. Performing in the play mobilized his political anger.

Chris lost job interviews because he wrote on the applications that he was deaf. He was called to interview when he did not mention his deafness. On one such occasion, the interviewer was shocked. Chris became angry. He said, "They need to look at my qualities, not my disabilities." He has turned his frustration into activism on behalf of deaf and queer rights. He works as a team with his hearing partner, Aaron, on advocacy issues. He is also on the board of directors of the Oregon Deaf Resource Center. The center educates people on how to use interpreters, and makes referrals and does outreach on behalf of the deaf community.

Chris works to educate the straight deaf community about HIV/AIDS issues. He also works on improving deaf access in the queer community via advocating for closed captioned television in the bars and interpreters at events.

Chris feels the queer community has more understanding about his deafness because of having also been oppressed. Likewise, he finds deaf straight people often are respectful of his queer identity whereas hearing heterosexuals often are not.

Chris sees an inner strength in disabled and queer people that mainstreamers often don't develop. He said, "I strongly believe anyone who is disabled has an advantage over 'normal' hearings, just as queers have an advantage over heterosexuals. Because queers and disabled develop strength that 'normal' people don't."

Sue Redding became blind several years ago. She is a computer programmer for a Portland bank. She writes, designs and tests the software that enables the bank to count its beans. She uses adaptive equipment, including speech synthesizer software that reads information to her from her computer screen. She also uses a Braille display. Sue said that adaptive equipment makes computers easily accessible for blind people, but the technology is expensive.

Sue said the biggest barrier blind people face is lack of information. Vast amounts of information are transmitted by paper. "I just had to laugh when I was at the [state] Blind Commission and they gave me this sheet of paper. Hello? Everything is already on computers—it's easy to put it on a disk, but they're so paper-oriented. We've had some success in getting documentation manuals from vendors in this format, although it was like pulling teeth to get it—which is hilarious, because you know they're not sitting down at the typewriter to do it. Most sighted people are very attached to their paper. I work with programmers. We have e-mail, where you send notes to each other electronically, and they can't just sit and read it, they have to go print it off. It's not real unless they have it on a piece of paper." Sue knows of people who became blind and lost their careers because their jobs were unnecessarily paper-oriented. She said approximately 95 percent of visually impaired people are unemployed, due to prejudice rather than to lack of ability.

Sue and I sat on a glassed-in balcony near her office. We talked about accessibility. "It's like they forgot about blind people. This building, for example, has glass walls. I'm partially sighted, and glass is invisible. I never go into the atrium by myself, because there's glass everywhere. They had a big concrete ashtray on the steps by the handrail, exactly where I needed to walk.

"I live in the Hawthorne area. Things like sidewalk signs, chairs and tables on the sidewalks get in the way in unpredictable places. Clutter on the sidewalk makes it very difficult for me to get up and down the street. There are Braille buttons on the elevators, but that's not really the problem. If somebody would just close their eyes and try to get around, they would have a better concept of the kinds of things most

people don't know much about because we live in a visual world. We're a very visual species and we rely on that."

Sue loves movies, but she misses much of the content because dialogue accounts for only a small portion of the plot. She receives some videos through an organization that broadcasts narration on a radio band. She would like more general narration to be available.

Sue struggles with the lack of transportation options in a car-oriented world. Public bathrooms are very difficult for her to use, because she first has to find everything. Standardization in the placement of towels, soap, sink, garbage cans, etc., would vastly improve access.

Sue plans to change careers. She will soon be laid off of her current job, and she intends to

*Imagine that accessibility is your issue. It is. If it is not your personal need today, it may become your need tomorrow.*



An ASL conversation at Lesbian and Gay Pride '94

study massage therapy. Some cultures traditionally employ blind people as masseuses. In this profession increased touch sensitivity can be a distinct advantage.

Sue discussed other advantages of her blindness. "I used to be very shy, a loner, mostly because I felt uncomfortable. Since I have been losing my vision I have had to reach out to people, and in doing that I've learned to trust people. I kid my friends about being 'visually distracted.' I'm learning to listen to my intuition.

"I do not judge people by their superficial appearance. There is no superficial appearance to judge them by. I'm a lot more open to people. I don't judge them by how they're dressed or the color of their skin or how they wear their hair or whether they have hair.

"My husband used to say that we all have our handicaps. Some of them are just more visible than others. It's easy to see what my handicap is. Everybody has one—or more. I meet some people who are 'normal' who I think are much more handicapped than I am, because of their emotional baggage. All I have to deal with is vision impairment. Compared to some things, that's pretty easy. It's pretty hard to miss—you can't be in denial about being blind," Sue laughed.

"I'm a walking educator. Because I was sighted and then I lost my vision, I am between both worlds. I can interpret. I speak both languages."

So do as Sue suggests. Imagine that accessibility is your issue. It is. If it is not your personal need today, it may become your need tomorrow. None of us is born with a lifetime guarantee of sight, hearing, health or mobility. We are all vulnerable to some form of disability. What can be guaranteed is the ability to freely interact and communicate. What can be guaranteed is access and equal rights.

The benefits to society of creating accessibility will be enormous financial savings and cultural gains. The ADA tells us what we *must* do. There is much more that we *need* to do. We need to make a place for each of us at the table. We need to implement our technology and develop inclusive social strategies. We need to create a level playing field, equalized by technological and social accommodations. We must remove the impediments that prevent any and all of us from achieving our full potential.

This is what it means to honor diversity.

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