

One bad accident puts healthy streets in a whole new light

BY ROB SADOWSKY
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

I broke my collarbone and three ribs two months ago. I needed to make significant adjustments to my regular commute to

work as a daily bicyclist. Walking and taking transit is something I generally enjoy. I like the extra time it may take to arrive at my destination, for I see new sights, hear new sounds,

and experience life from a different viewpoint. But I also carry stuff: a lunch, a book to read, my notebook, a water bottle and often a sweater. I couldn't carry stuff on my body with a broken collarbone — no backpack, no messenger bag. So, I loaded up my stuff into a rolling backpack I had at home and began a new street experience.

Streets are complicated places designed for many different users crisscrossing their way. When our streets are designed well, we move fluidly with no worries of obstacles. When our streets are overfilled, the flow slows down or stops, or in common vernacular, it "locks." Our streets do not end at the curb — they extend through the sidewalk experience, and when you do that they get even more complicated. We'll dance our way through the sidewalk experience in different ways than we

might if we were driving a car. We rarely think of our sidewalk traffic locking up like our automobile congested streets do, but they present challenges and roadblocks, just the same.

Rolling with a bag gave me a new appreciation for the frustrations that people using strollers or wheelchairs feel every moment of their walking life. I know every corner in my neighborhood that lacks a curb cut (the little ramp to get you up the curb). I learned to hope that the next bus or MAX train coming would be one of the newer, more accessible models, rather than the old ones with two big steps up. For each time I had to lift my bag, I felt acute pain. There were numerous times when I would depart a bus at a grassy location, sometimes wet and muddy, with no sidewalk present, forcing me to carry my bag several feet until I was once again on firm reliable concrete.

Rolling with a bag also placed me in a different location on the sidewalk, particularly when it came to intersections. Curb cuts are most often at the corner sharing space with two directions. One corner curb cut is cheaper than two in each direction, but it also means that one has to roam out a bit into the street to cross. I was always left with a feeling of vulnerability as I got near to traffic, to busses and trains. Had I been visually impaired, unable to see the type of intersection I was about to enter, that dance out into the street would be even more frustrating — and dangerous.

I learned to adapt, to grow accustomed to the new environment, my new dance along the street. I also learned to accept the indirect route, for shortcuts were filled with even more obstacles. Yes, I adapted. But, I never enjoyed it the way I usually enjoy walking.

I'm lucky, though. I'm able to return to bicycling, carrying my stuff on my bike. I'm able to change my dance. Not everyone can do that. I believe it is the responsibility of society to design streets that make our streets a wonderful dance rather than one with obstacles. I also know that it is possible. I've experienced streets where the curb cuts are directly perpendicular to the direction traveling rather than at the corner. I've traveled on TriMet busses that are more accommodating for people with limited mobility. What would it take for TriMet to replace every bus and MAX train with the new accessible model? The recent bond initiative that failed would have helped enormously.

We have streets in our grid that are still locked to pedestrians. We have whole blocks that lack sidewalks entirely. This is a call to action! Let all of our regional governments, neighborhood associations, planners and engineers collaborate to build complete streets, streets that are healthy for all users.

I also call on you, readers, to get actively involved in the healthy streets movement. One day, you might need healthy streets just like I did.



HEALTHY STREETBEAT

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Healthy Streetbeat is a monthly column for Street Roots written by the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (BTA). Our contributors are Rob Sadowsky, executive director, and Margaux Mennesson, communications director.

Ultimately, we're on the same side, even when we're not

On Aug. 23, 2009, I wrote about what was then known as the Resource Access Center (RAC) and how a few of my homeless brothers and I bought a lottery ticket. We were hoping to win and

buy a huge storage place to change it into a shelter for all. Of course, it did not work out.

I went to the groundbreaking ceremony for the RAC building. I asked City

Commissioner Nick Fish if I could take a picture with him. He said yes, and suggested we both hold the same shovel. The picture was taken. I then asked for another picture. The picture I wanted was of me, Commissioner Fish, and the empty shovels (there must have been eight of them). The photographers looked at me like I was crazy and most of them refused to take it. A few took the picture and I asked them to send it to me. I don't remember seeing any of the pictures of me, Fish, and the empty shovels. The reason I wanted that picture, was because I knew my homeless brothers were with us then. I could see them next to the shovels. Some of them teasing each other about how to hold it. They always did that; accused each other of holding the shovel and not working.

Time went by and I asked, Commissioner Fish for an interview. The time and place were set, but then my back went out. The interview was going to be part of a documentary, but it didn't happen.

Around this time, Commissioner Fish asked me if I would write a poem for the opening ceremonies for the center. I said yes. I had plenty of time to write a poem. I asked for information on the building to inspire me. It didn't come until late. I got all of the information, sat it on a table at Whole Foods in Hollywood, started reading it and looking at the picture. I even read my column. I sat there soaking it all in. Nothing. Nothing stuck out. My mind was blank. I went through it again. Still nothing. I still had some time left, and I put it on the

back burner.

I started working on my projects, meetings, columns, talking to the public, and poems. In between these, I would try to work on the poem for the opening ceremony. Still nothing. Every time I saw Commissioner Fish he would ask about the poem. I'd tell him I'm working on it.

I wrote several poems one titled "Thinking Outside the Box" and "Being Human?" Being a frustrated homeless advocate and homeless person, these words just fell out.

I was helping on a project with my brothers and sisters from Nicklesville in Seattle, WA. It was a direct action/protest. I went up to Seattle and when I came back I had a message, "Need to have the poem." It was two weeks before the ceremonies. Man, where did the time go?

I figured "Being Human?" was a perfect fit. I sent a copy to Commissioner Fish's office. They liked it.

So it was all set on June 2. I would read my poem "Being Human?" on the morning of the opening ceremonies. I started videotaping everything. The podium where we were going to speak, the empty chairs, the people coming. I put my stuff in the front row. I went mingling with my video camera. I came back and sat in the front row waiting for the ceremonies to begin. Commissioner Fish came around and we got to talking. I told him just like I told Israel Bayer, whom I was there with from Street Roots, "I feel weird, like I am going to get arrested." Both of them assured me that I wasn't. Commissioner Fish quipped, "Not now anyway." We all started laughing.

A couple of months before the opening ceremonies, they changed the Resource Access Center (RAC) to the "Bud Clark Commons." I met Bud Clark, he's a real nice man. I believe this was his cause years before.

After the speeches were done. They invited us to take a tour of the Bud Clark Commons. From the entrance way they had some good stuff. They had a bike repair center, dog kennels, benches, smoking area. Inside they had a big conference room, mail

room, pretty good commons area, computer room, laundry room, showers, lockers, and it said library but I didn't see a kitchen. Upstairs were the rooms; I didn't make it up there.

I know some of my friends would have been disappointed; it was not what we had envisioned. I'd have to reason with them and say, "Hey, it's better than nothing"

Just before I got up to read my poem I did something I hadn't done in years, and that was say a little prayer. I guess this is what my best friend Joanne Marinex calls closure.

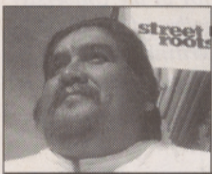
Days after the ceremony I couldn't shake the thought of being arrested; that feeling I had. I couldn't get it out of my mind. Then it occurred to me, since 2001 I have been fighting for shelters, for tent cities, and for homeless people to have a safe, secure place. Talking to decision makers, hearing them saying "no" to the shelters and tent cities. Their reasoning was that they were going to put everybody into housing. We would reply, "That's great, but that's a long-term goal. What are you going to do in the meantime?" This conversation goes on and on.

Then it's time for direct action, starting a tent city or camping outside in a huge group. This is how Dignity Village started in 2000 and it's still running today. The people that started dignity village had to go through the torment of being harassed by the cops and rent a cops, telling them they couldn't pitch their tents and or sleep in certain areas.

Doing such action ends in arrest or threat of arrest. Getting back to my original thought of being arrested.

Why is it that when homeless people and grassroots organizations try to start a tent city or shelter there is the threat of being arrested? But with a multi-million dollar project like the Bud Clark Commons there was no threat. I mean, we're both fighting for the same thing: to get the less fortunate in a safe secure place, off the streets.

But one route is a lot rougher than the other.



THE WANDERER

Leo Rhodes

Leo Rhodes is a street activist and homeless advocate. He is also a vendor with Street Roots and a regular contributor to the newspaper.