

# Adventures In Accessibility | CPD Blog

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08/07/2017

My name is Mary Ellen Heiner and I have been working at the Center for Persons with Disabilities since 1984 as a staff assistant/office manager, and now even an instructor. I was involved in a farming accident at the age of two that left me paralyzed from the waist down. This year, for the first time EVER, I, my sister, and my two brothers and their wives went on our first family vacation. Having grown up on a farm in Wyoming, our “family vacations” consisted of an evening at the swimming pool up Snake River Canyon or fishing and a picnic in the mountains—as long as we left after the milking was done in the morning and we were back by 4:00 to do it again at night. So, let’s start with Day One of our family vacation. My sister and I were in my car and my brothers and their friend were on their Harley Davidson motorbikes. Our first stop was at a beautiful spot called Mesa Falls, ID—just outside of Island Park. There was a beautiful, PAVED area where I could easily view the majestic falls up close and personal. From Mesa Falls we went to West Yellowstone, where I had made reservations at a motel that said it was wheelchair accessible. And it was—up to a point. I could get into the room but there the accessibility ended. Not only did one of the two beds in the room block wheelchair access to the bathroom but after moving the bed as far as the room would allow, I discovered that my wheelchair, which is a regular standard size wheelchair, wouldn’t fit through the bathroom door. Minor detail. Then came the challenge of trying to get into the bed! Beds these days have such high mattresses. These beds were higher than the arms on my wheelchair, making it impossible to slide from my wheelchair to the bed. There happened to be a sturdy chair by the doorway that we moved over to the bed. I found that if I slid from my wheelchair to the chair and then twisted my body so I was leaning over the bed, with my sister’s help, I could pull myself onto the bed—kind of like leap-frogging from one lily pad to another. That figured out, I was still left with the dilemma of what to do when I needed to use the bathroom. Luckily, I did come “prepared” for just such a circumstance. Let’s just say that I had to get out of my wheelchair and crawl into the bathroom—nuff said. Then once I crawled back to the chair by my bed, my sister had to help lift my legs while I lifted with my arms until I was in the chair and then again from the chair into the bed. I refrained from drinking anything for the remainder of the night in the hopes that I wouldn’t have to get up during the night to use the bathroom! Day Two of our eight-day vacation was not much better. We visited Yellowstone National Park—having grown up in Wyoming, I had always wanted to go there and see the sites, particularly Old Faithful. The Park is very considerate to have numerous Wheelchair Accessible walkways and “restrooms” scattered throughout. However, what they don’t take into consideration is that when an individual who is in a wheelchair transfers from their wheelchair to the “accessible” toilet, they have to slide from one seat to the other. The seats on the toilet were not designed for that kind of movement and as I would transfer, the seat of the toilet would go sliding off the side. I would slide back to my wheelchair and move the seat back onto the toilet and then try sliding over again, with the same result. I eventually gave up and went in search of regular restroom in the building with the souvenir shop. Problem solved. The second night of our vacation we stayed at a chain motel in Powell, Wyoming. Again, they assured our friends who made the reservations that they had a room on the first floor that was accessible. I ran into the same problems as the first hotel—that is, the wheelchair couldn’t fit through the bathroom door and the beds were too high. Unlike the first night, however, there wasn’t a chair in the room that I could slide over to the bed that I could use. So my brother and I went to the front desk and explained the dilemma and we asked if there were any rooms where the beds weren’t so tall. She very politely apologized and said that the beds were all the same. I asked her if they had any roll-away beds. She said they did but they were all located on the second floor and they couldn’t bring them down to the first floor (there was no elevator). I then asked if it would be possible to take the mattress off the roll-away bed and then move me and my sister to a room with only one bed in it so that there would be room to put the mattress from the roll-away bed on the floor and I would just sleep on the floor. She said they would be happy to do that. I “made do” with the bathroom situation that same as I did the first night. Then my sister and I went through the same ritual of getting me into the wheelchair the next morning—meaning she lifted my legs while I lifted with my arms and then she turned my body until I was finally in the wheelchair. On the bright side, it was a great cardiovascular workout.

Mary Ellen and her sister, Suzann, at Mt. Rushmore, looking very presidential. Each of the following nights we made sure that we stayed at some of the better quality hotels, such as Marriott, where their wheelchair-accessible rooms were truly

wheelchair accessible—almost. The beds were still too high, but each of the rooms had good, sturdy chairs that I was able to “leap frog” from one to the other and then to the bed. The restrooms were a dream—I was able to roll into the showers and take wonderful showers and wash my wheelchair at the same time! Each stop we made after that to tour, fill up with gas, or to eat, we made sure had regular wheelchair accessible bathrooms—beginning with Devil’s Tower, Mt. Rushmore, Sturgis, Deadwood, Independence Rock, and Martin’s Cove. An overall amazing trip with a few hiccups along the way. Enough hiccups that I question whether I want to do it again next year. It also tells me that as far as we have come with the enactment of the American’s with Disabilities Act, we still have a way to go to make things truly accessible for all individuals. On the bright side (and everybody knows that there is a bright side to everything—if you look for it), it opened up my brothers’ eyes to the frustrations I face on a regular basis when it comes to accessibility. They both realized just how inaccessible their homes were for me when I come to visit and they have both told me that they were going to make changes.

## Travel Tips for the Future

If I were to do this again—and given time to recover from the sometimes frustrating and embarrassing situations I encountered due to inaccessibility issues, I just might—I would do a few things different

1. When making hotel reservations and I requesting a wheelchair-accessible room, I would question the reservation clerk more thoroughly about what their definition of accessible was.
2. I would ask that they actually measure the doorways of not only the sleeping room but also the restroom so that I would know if a wheelchair could fit through it. When possible, I would ask to actually see the room to make sure that it was acceptable to me and would accommodate my wheelchair.
3. I would not be quite so amenable to the substandard amenities I encountered (if any). While on the trip my attitude was “I’ll make do—it’s only one night.” I shouldn’t have to “make do”—I’m entitled to having a wonderful experience just like anybody else is.
4. I would make sure that the management knew how displeased I was with the inaccessibility of their “accessible” rooms. My sister checked us out of all of our hotels and when asked how everything was, she said it was fine. I will also write a review of my experience in these two “accessible” hotels on Trip Advisor so that those who may be looking for accessible accommodations will know that they are NOT wheelchair accessible. Don’t get me wrong, the hotels themselves were very nice—if you didn’t have any special needs. But I personally feel that I shouldn’t have to pay more to stay at a higher-end hotel just so that the “accessible” room was truly accessible. Like anybody else, I need to watch my pennies.