



Bill Morgan has lost count of how many times he has walked into obstructions on Boise sidewalks. "I've been seriously injured a few times and flat on my back," he said.



IN PLAIN SIGHT

Bill Morgan has been blind since childhood. In the 1980s, he successfully walked across the United States to raise awareness for alcoholism and the National Federation of the Blind. Now, overgrown trees and other obstacles hinder Morgan's daily stroll through his Boise neighborhood.

GEORGE PRENTICE

Shep knew something was wrong. The salt and pepper-colored, Australian shepherd guide dog dog paused, catching Bill Morgan unaware.

"What is it, Shep? What's wrong?" asked the 71-year-old Morgan, who is blind, as he brushed his cane from side to side on the sidewalk in front of him, trying to detect some possible danger—there was no ditch, curb, oncoming bicyclist or nearby lawn mower. Morgan pulled on Shep's harness, ready to continue his daily walk through his Boise Bench neighborhood. A split-second later, Morgan walked straight into the thick branch—which stretched across the width of the sidewalk—growing from a tree in neighbor's yard.

"I've lost count of how many times this has happened. I've been seriously injured a few times [and] flat on my back," said Morgan, lifting a shirt sleeve and pant leg to reveal a collection of scars. "I was walking along, you know, ba-cha, ba-cha, ba-cha and then right in the face. Pow, wham! It really scares you. Yeah, I've been knocked on my ass a number of times."

Morgan's neighborhood is lovely. The tree-lined streets—Shadybrook, Country Squire and Maple Grove—are practically welcoming a late summer or early fall stroll.

"We moved here, I think it was in 1988, and at times, the sidewalks could be a god-dam jungle," Morgan said. "Please understand, this is about everybody. I think this is something a lot of people can relate to. It's an intrusion of a public right-of-way. Bushes, trees, you name it. I've been knocked flat on my back. My face has been all scratched up by needles or branches."

Morgan has tried on multiple occasions to say something to homeowners but, more often than not, he doesn't know who to talk to.

"And sometimes I've called out when I have fallen. I know someone is there, but they never respond," Morgan said. "On those few occasions when I try to break off a branch that has stretched out across the sidewalk... boy, [I] sure hear from them then. A few have been receptive, but some people get madder than hell."

The obvious question is: Doesn't the city have laws in place to protect pedestrians, particularly those with a disability, from such danger?

"Have we called the City of Boise? Countless times. Sometimes they respond, but a lot of times, nothing changes," said Morgan's son, Bill Morgan, Jr. "Years ago, the city sent somebody out and did a ride-along with my dad, and things got better for a little while, but then it happens again and again. At what point will people understand this is a major issue?"

The city already has. Section 9-08-01 of Boise Municipal Code reads "any person who shall obstruct, injure or impair, any of the sidewalks, streets or alleys in the City... and shall continue such obstruction for a period of 24 hours after notice from any police officer, or City Clerk Licensing Enforcement Officers to remove the same shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor." Section 9-16-13 is even more specific: "...Any tree or part thereof which... constitutes a hazard to public safety" or "any tree or part thereof which obstructs the free passage of pedestrian or vehicular traffic" are "hereby declared public nuisances." Anyone with a complainant can call Boise Code Enforcement at 208-608-7060 or file online at pds.cityofboise.org. Anonymous reports will not be accepted.



MEETING RONALD REAGAN

What makes the challenges Bill Morgan faces when navigating his neighborhood streets so ironic, is that he once walked across the United States to the White House. In a personal diary entry dated Oct. 24, 1983, then-President Ronald Reagan wrote about spending the day getting updates on a car-bombing in Beirut and meeting with then-Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to discuss the pending invasion of Grenada. Reagan also noted he was meeting with radio and television journalists from around the U.S., and was scheduled to take what he called a "whole flock" of photos with a long list of visitors.

"Topping them all was Bill Morgan, the blind young man who walked across the country from Idaho to Baltimore just to prove the handicapped shouldn't be counted out," Reagan wrote.

It was an important accomplishment for Morgan, but was only one among a slate of triumphs, some of which were overshadowed by the many challenges he faced

Bill Morgan was born June 4, 1946 and by the time he was in the third grade, he was 95 percent blind. Like both of his parents (who divorced with Morgan was five), he was diagnosed

with retinitis pigmentosa, a hereditary degenerative disease. Morgan, who was 95 percent blind by the time he was in the third grade, remembers a childhood in which he would lead his mother from corner to corner in downtown areas of several cities in the Northwest, where she would play a cello or accordion for tips.

"We kept getting kicked out for begging," said Morgan. "Before I lost most of my sight, I could see the looks of pity and disgust on the faces of passersby. In the 1950s, we received a welfare check called Blind Aid. It was \$90 a month. We had very little and lived in the ghetto of each new city."

Morgan began working at age 10, cutting lawns, collecting bottles for deposits, cleaning out basements and garages, and picking beans or berries at local farms. At age 15, he earned 50 cents an hour making brooms and mops at a workshop for the blind in Portland, Oregon. In 1967, Morgan married the love of his life, Lynda (they celebrated their 50th anniversary this year). He was 20, totally blind and only earning 85 cents an hour at the workshop, where he would work for years to come. During much of that time, Morgan faced another challenge, one that would inspire his cross-country journey.

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In 1983, Bill Morgan walked from Oregon to Washington, D.C.—3,615 miles—where he met then-President Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office.



THREE BANDS FOR BLIND KIDS

There are nearly 500 visually impaired children across the Gem State, according to the Idaho Educational Services for the Deaf and Blind. Their parents, caregivers and teachers often relish any opportunity to participate in recreation or arts activities outside of a classroom setting.

"We're thrilled with what we're going to be able to accomplish through Three Bands for Blind Kids," said Dana Ard, president of the Idaho Federation of the Blind of Idaho. "We've never done something like this before, but when we got the bands to perform, it all came together."

On Sunday, Oct. 15, Boise-based bands Gerry & the Dreambenders, the Hoochie Coochie Men and The Mystics, will perform at the Mardi Gras Event Center, with proceeds going to sports, recreation and arts programs for visually impaired children.

"For one reason or another, blind kids may be pulled from sports, but here are so many things to do. Do you know about beep ball?" asked Ard, referring to a variation of baseball played by those with visual impairment, using a beeping ball. "And tandem bicycling and just about any form of recreation you can think of. And art? There's plenty of research that tells us kids get a good sense of spatial orientation through drawing. It really helps them get around. There are so many ways to raise these kids up."

Advance tickets for Three Bands for Blind Kids are \$20 at 3bands.brownpapertickets.com. Otherwise, admission is \$25 at the door. The music starts at 2:30 p.m., and attendees can pop in anytime until 8 p.m.

—George Prentice

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"I drank from age 12 until I was 30," said Morgan. "In 1976, I weighed 265 pounds, and my liver was enlarging and turning yellow orange. I was smoking two packs of cigarettes a day. It was New Year's Eve 1976, sitting in a bar, that I prayed the prayer of all drunks: 'God, if you are real, please help me.' I haven't had a drink since."

THE WALK

For decades after he quit drinking, Morgan attended and hosted Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, many of them in his home.

"I asked God how I could give back, how I could share with others what I had been taught by other blind people," said Morgan. "I wanted to share my story of alcoholism. So, in 1982, I decided to walk across America," he said, pulling out a huge black portfolio, filled with newspaper clippings and photos documenting his walk across the United States.

Bill and Lynda's three children—Kelly (age 12), Rhonda (age 11) and Bill, Jr. (age 10)—rode in a modest motorhome with their mother while Bill walked behind it. The walk was co-sponsored by the Christian Record Braille Foundation. On the back of the motorhome was a huge sign that read, "Stepping out for life and the NFB. I believe in life. I believe in challenges. I believe in God. Come walk with me. Bill Morgan."

Along the way, donations kept the gas

tank full, and the Morgans would spend the night or be invited to a potluck dinner somewhere, courtesy of a family or small church. In total, Morgan walked 3,615 miles in 318 days—and then he was at the Oval Office shaking the hand of President Reagan.

"I found it hard to believe I was the same person who had stood on city streets holding the basket that passersby threw their coins into while my blind mother played music on the corner so we could survive," said Morgan. "This was what it meant to say that it is respectable to be blind."

Though Morgan and his family saw a great deal of the U.S. during his walk, their move to Idaho came about after a different trip. In 1985, the Morgans were living in Bend, Oregon, and a friend asked Morgan to accompany him on a car trip to Boise, where the friend owned a pet store.

"I remember it as if it were yesterday," said Morgan. "I stepped out of the car, and I remember the sound and the smell of all the trees. I couldn't believe how many trees there were. It sounded so great and peaceful."

Morgan and his family first lived in a double-wide trailer in Garden City before, in the late '80s, buying the home they still live in. Morgan worked at a ranch and a chemical plant, and served as a drug and alcohol counselor for three years. Lynda got a job working in the cafeteria of a nearby school, where she works to this day. They love spending time with their grandchildren. Life hasn't been

easy for Morgan, though.

"Fifteen years ago, I was diagnosed, with no warning whatsoever, with rectal, colon and groin cancer," said Morgan. "A couple of years later, it spread to my lungs," said Morgan. "I was laid up in a bed or a chair for the next eight years. I went through a number of surgeries. I went through chemotherapy. I almost died several times." Then, this past summer, Morgan underwent prostate surgery and had an external pacemaker attached to his heart.

"But I've got to keep moving; I have to keep walking," he said.

So each morning, Morgan straps a colostomy bag—which has a tiny device that injects painkillers into his system, as needed—grabs his braille compass, his cane and Shep, and he heads out.

Bill Jr. is his father's biggest advocate and is angry the man who has faced so many challenges can't take a walk around his neighborhood without fear of being knocked to the ground by an errant branch.

"Do you know what my Dad's favorite quote is?" Bill Jr. asked. "I will find a way or make one," from Hannibal, the infamous Carthaginian general who crossed the Alps in 218 B.C. "I guess by now, you've learned a bit about my dad. My dad has been..." Voice cracking, Bill Jr. continued. "My dad has been through hell. I wish he could see his grandchildren; but in so many ways, my dad sees more than most of us." **BW**

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