Kathy Ashley’s Speech

Speech delivered by Kathy Ashley at the National Federation of the Blind of Indiana 2006 state convention.

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Thank you for asking me to speak at your State convention.

I am honored to be asked and surprised that so many of you think I have something significant to say.

When Pam asked me if I would be willing to speak she explained that the theme of the convention is “Bridging the Gap of Visual Differences” That got me to thinking about bridges.  What is a bridge?  What is the function of a bridge?  Why do we have bridges?

A bridge is a structure that allows passage across an obstacle.  It is a link or a means of approach.  Synonyms for the word bridge are Bond, Tie, Link, Connection.

There is more to a bridge than providing a walk way.  It adds beauty and potency to the view.  A bridge can be a focal point.  A bridge can be a time saving short cut.  Bridges must be designed for form, longevity and safety.

A bridge spans a gap, a valley, a river, an obstacle.   Basically a bridge is a horizontal beam supported by piers.  So, what do we want to bridge?  Visual differences?  Do we want to connect individuals who are blind or visually impaired with sighted individuals?  Do we want to connect individuals with low vision to individuals who are totally blind?  We need to determine what is our gap or obstacle.

I believe the obstacle we want to overcome is the exclusion of people with vision problems from the general public.  Or how do we get blind people out and about and into the community?

Keeping with my mental picture of a bridge, imagine there is a valley.  On one side are the blind and visually impaired.  On the other side is the general society.  This is the valley of negative attitudes and misconceptions.

Society typically has lower expectations for a blind or visually impaired person.  Please excuse me, I am not going to be politically correct here, I think I will refer to the blind and visually impaired population as VIP for the rest of my talk.  Is that OK?

All right, we have the general public’s lower expectations for a VIP.  This can totally devastate a person’s ability to live.  It affects their independence, their productivity, their contribution to society.  A popular theory, way back when I was taking psychology and sociology classes in college, was the philosophy of self-fulfilling prophecy.  An individual would live up to (or down to) the expectations placed on them.  If a teacher expected a student to be a D student based on that student’s scholastic record, then the probability of that student receiving a D grade from that teacher is extremely high.  On the other hand, if the teacher expected the student to do C work, then the student, more than likely, would hand in C grade level work.

Society tends to believe that you can’t do what you can’t see.  It is hard for a member of the general society to imagine doing the things you do each day without giving it a second thought.   With one hundred thirty five million, six hundred sixty nine thousand and eight hundred ninety seven cars in the US it is a foreign idea for most of society to consider using public transportation.  It is terrifying when they think about using the bus without sight.  Preparing meals, raising children, working, these are all unimaginable to the general sighted public.  Their thoughts run along the lines of: I wouldn’t be able to do that if I couldn’t see.  I wouldn’t be able to run the sweeper, use my computer at work and so on and so on.   Why, I would be incompetent.

They are speaking out of fear.  And fear, a lot of times, has it’s foundation in ignorance.  We fear what we don’t know.  And to extend this thought….the general sighted public feels that “if I can’t do that then no one else can do it either.’  Now granted, this is a pretty egotistical view.  And my explanation is very simplistic.  Attitudes, negative and positive, are much like a Vandalia onion, they have many layers.  But, I’m not here to speak about onions.

So, let’s build that bridge.  We have the valley of negative attitudes that we want to cross and become integrated into general society.  It is my belief that we need some strong pillars to support our bridge.

The first pillar is skill.  The VIP needs to develop the needed skills to maintain independence.  This includes mobility training, learning alternative methods for communication.  Like Braille.  And in today’s society, having some basic computer skills is almost mandatory.

These are some of the basic skills that today’s society asks of all its members.  We all need to be able to get around our environment safely and with grace.  We all need to be able to write down information for later use.  We all should know something about computers.  These are not unreasonable expectations. These are not expectations specifically for a VIP.  Everyone needs these skills.

There is little tolerance for a needy person.  Society will assist a needy person, but Society also has the expectation that they will eventually gain the skills where they will not need help.  Of course there are social programs that provide such assistance.  But society, as a whole, perceives itself as not having the time to provide continual assistance.  Thus the establishment of so many social service programs.  You can’t use blindness to receive advantages or benefits and then use blindness to demand equality and opportunity.  With equality comes responsibility.  Part of that responsibility is to be independent within society.

A second pillar is perspective.  Don’t automatically presume that a VIP is inferior.  I’m handing out an optical illusion.  If you look at it one way you will see a face.  Change your perspective and you will see what?  It is all in your perspective, how you present yourself to the general public.  If you believe you are a person of value, you will react as a person of value.  And, eventually, you will be seen as a person of value.

A third pillar is integration.  Get out there.  I know it can be inconvenient and intimidating to attend functions and events with the sighted general public.  But, that isn’t just a “blind thing”.  A lot of people, sighted, non-sighted, hearing, in a wheel chair or temporarily able-bodied, are anxious and hesitant about attending events.  It isn’t always the easiest thing for anyone to do.  But the more general society sees a successful, confident and independent VIP going about their daily business, the more likely they are to begin to change their misconceptions.  Proof is in the pudding, so they say.  If the general public sees a VIP waiting for the bus, dressed in business attire and obviously going to their job, the more likely the VIP will be viewed as competent and not an object of pity or someone who needs to be taken care of.

The fourth pillar is ambassadorship.  You are an ambassador for all VIPs.  You may be the only VIP someone meets.  You may be the basis for someone’s opinion about what a VIP can or cannot do.  Any future interaction with a VIP that this person meets will be colored by their interaction with you. Or, you could be the antidote to their earlier bad experience with a VIP.  I am not saying that a VIP should go around with a toothy artificial smile.  But you should be your usual competent, successful, self-aware, independent VIP who is pleased with themselves.

How can this be accomplished?  The annual NFB Meet the Blind day is a good place to start.  But, let me say that last year I stopped in and had planned on hanging out for while just to chat with folks and see what was going on.  There was a literature table, an individual demonstrating some adaptive equipment and someone reading Braille.  I can sum my experience up in one word boring.  I tried to talk with the Braille reader, hoping they would tell me a little bit about what they were reading.  Honestly, I can’t recall what was being read but I got the feeling that reading the Braille was more important than talking to me.  I left the room shortly afterwards and went back to work.  If I was an uninformed member of the general public I would think that all VIPs are like this so why waste my time trying to get to know more about Braille?  And consequently VIPs.

Make the Meet the Blind day more interactive.  Offer a hands-on demonstration.  Give an exhibition on Braille using a muffin tin to show the lay-out of the Braille cell.  Offer to Braille something for the person.  AFB has a poster titled: Braille: Dots for Reading.  It has the Braille alphabet and then a joke or a puzzle with the answer given in Braille.  This would encourage a person to learn a little more about Braille.  Set up a tactile obstacle course.  You could have boxes with different objects in them and the general public would have to figure out what is in the box by touch only.  Give them a Hershey kiss if they get it right.  Or offer a short O&M lesson.  Or have vision simulators and ask the attendee to read the newspaper.  Make meet the Blind day fun.

There are many other ways to bring VIPs to the attention of the general sighted public.  The NFB could sponsor a water table at the mini-marathon.  VIPs can hand out the water to the runners.  Talk with the Colts, the Pacers, the Indians, and the Ice about having an NFB recognition night.  Set up a table at the main entrance to share information with the crowd.  And again, please make it a “fun” table.  Not just literature, have some fun handouts like key chains or emery boards.  You could sale the NFB wristbands.  Maybe one of our talented VIPs could sign the national anthem.  At a hockey game, the VIP could participate in the honorary puck drop.  There are a lot of community activities that the NFB could become involved in.  This would only strengthen the ties between the VIP community and the sighted community.

Keep in mind that a bridge usually has two way traffic.  There are sighted folks who want to meet you and get to know more about blindness and how you do the things you do.  These may be the people who offer to help you cross the street.  They don’t realize that you are more than capable of crossing a street by yourself.  They just want to help and maybe, get to know you.

One of the most effective ways to demonstrate ambassadorship is to become employed.  The VIP will be out there, daily, working, pulling their own weight and showing the doubting Thomases in the general public that there is nothing a VIP, given the right tools, can’t do.   I am not minimizing the enormity of this task.  We are looking at the statistic that 75-80% of the working-age blind are unemployed.  This means that the general public sees only 20 to 25% of VIPs.  They don’t know the richness, the joy, the knowledge, the skills a VIP can offer to the sighted labor force.

You are ambassadors.  You may be the only image someone has of a VIP.  It all starts with attitude.   Attitude is catching so why not make it a good attitude?

Again, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you.  Please keep in mind what I said comes straight from my book:  Fiction or Fact, Kathy’s Almanac.  The opinions expressed are mine and mine alone.  Thank you.