

Traveling Tips
By Joanne Laurent

Editor's Note: This article is the written transcript of a speech given during our Fall 2000 convention by Joanne Laurent, who serves as an Orientation & Mobility Instructor/Rehabilitation Teacher at the Department of Services for the Blind.

TRAVEL SKILLS

Blind people who use their canes go places and they have fun. Everybody in this room has the potential to travel freely and independently, if blindness is the only thing that is preventing you from doing so.

The first thing you need to do to become a good traveler is be willing to use alternative techniques. That means if you're blind, you need to admit that you're blind and not be ashamed about it. Don't worry about what other people think about you carrying a cane. They'll get over it. If you cannot see well enough to walk at a normal speed, or you find that you avoid going out because you can't see very well, or you trip over things, or you are afraid of stairs, you need a cane. The cane is not a symbol of dependency. Quite the contrary; the cane is a symbol of independence. If you can't see, the cane is your ticket to freedom. Think about the blind people that you know who refuse to carry a cane. Are they free to come and go as they please? Or do they have to wait for the perfect circumstances to come along or a person to help them before they can go anywhere? Now think about other blind people you know who carry their canes proudly – do you notice that they seem to have more fun?

You can carry a cane and be respected. In fact, you will be more respected by others if you're not preoccupied with finding the floor under your feet or worrying about running into an obstacle that is not bright enough or big enough for you to see it easily. You will be more respected by others if you are holding your head up high and walking with confidence. Do you all know our national treasurer, Allen Harris? He has self-confidence. You can't help but respect him. Yes. He carries a cane. But his cane in no way interferes with who he is. Allen commands respect when he walks into a room. You can also command respect from people. But in order to do that, you must first respect yourself. Believe that it really, really, really is respectable to be blind.

If you can't see well enough to travel easily and you refuse to carry a cane, you'll be a prisoner to your blindness. Put a cane in your hand and carry it proudly, and a whole new world will open up to you. If you know you should be using a cane and you are squeamish about being seen with one, I'd like to challenge you to carry a cane for just three weeks. Carry it with you always, wherever you go – *especially* in front of family and friends. If it's a folding cane, DO NOT fold it for the full three weeks. Stand it in a corner or put it on the floor when it's not in use. If you are holding someone's arm, use the cane at the same time. It will give you more information about the ground under you. Family and friends may try to get you to put the cane away and use them to guide you. Tell them NO. The cane is your symbol of freedom and independence. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. After your family and friends see you with a cane for a while, they'll get used to it and they'll think nothing of it. It's kind of like getting a new hairstyle or changing the color. At first, people will notice and comment. Then they'll get over it and it really won't be a big deal anymore. The cane will become a part of you, just like your hair color. Once people get used to your new haircut or hair color, they don't notice it anymore. The same thing will happen with your cane. After the people who are close to you get used to seeing you with it for a while they'll stop focusing on the cane and go back to focusing on you as a person. And you will have a new freedom you never thought possible.

HOW TO BECOME A SKILLED TRAVELER

If you're having difficulty with a travel issue, break it down into small pieces. Think through how you'll do each little piece, one at a time. Don't overwhelm yourself with what you think you should be doing

because somebody else you know can do it. Find your own personal beginning point and gradually work your way from there. For instance if you can't walk out your front door without giving the matter a second thought, begin by teaching yourself how to go from the front door to the sidewalk gracefully and easily. Don't worry about how to get downtown alone just yet; that's too overwhelming. Start with something just slightly out of your comfort range. Practice until you feel comfortable. Then stretch yourself again by going out of your comfort range. Go a little farther each time. Don't be afraid to experiment. Be adventurous. If you have even the slightest twinge of fear about walking from your front door to the sidewalk or, if you are not able to do that as quickly and easily as a sighted person could do it, that probably means you are not using your cane properly (or, you're not using a cane at all and you should be).

If you are not moving smoothly, comfortably, and gracefully with your cane, ask someone to help you use it properly. Some of the very best travel teachers can be people who need to use the skills every day so if you can get help from a good blind traveler I encourage you to do that. Those of you who are good at cane travel, consider volunteering your services. Mentor one another. Basic cane use is not rocket science. However, just to make sure I stay out of trouble, if there is anyone who feels uncomfortable with my suggestion that an unqualified person teach travel I'll say this: If you are just learning to use a cane you must take responsibility for your own safety. Basically, if you do not feel safe, you're probably not. Just keep practicing in an area where there are no safety hazards before you decide to go mountain climbing. On the other hand, if you feel at ease walking with your cane because it is giving you information that you need about obstacles and drop-offs, that's exactly what you want. Go for it!

If you are a pretty good traveler but you're only traveling routes to places you're familiar with, break yourself out of that mold. Stretch yourself. Again...start small. Go a short distance in an unfamiliar direction. Don't go farther than you can go without being able to get back to a familiar place. But do go *someplace* new. If you make sure you don't wander outside of access to a familiar reference point, you can explore to your heart's content without worrying about getting disoriented. For instance: Let's say you're in a building and you'd like to know more about it. All you know about it is how to get from the front door to one specific service desk. Let's say there's a pop machine next to the service desk that constantly makes a humming noise. You can use that pop machine as your reference point while you wander around exploring all the nooks and crannies of the room. Just make sure you stay within earshot of the pop machine. When you're finished exploring, walk straight toward the sound of the pop machine and you'll know exactly where you are again. You also know where the front door is. Most likely, if you're in a public building you can hear the door opening and closing. The front door could just as easily be your reference point. If you're exploring outside, you can use traffic sounds as reference points, odors wafting out of businesses, easy to find physical landmarks, a body of water, you can use anything that means something to you. Use anything that will tell you exactly where you are when you are standing near it as a place you make sure you know how to get back to at any time while you are exploring.

If your travel skills are such that you're currently not going anywhere alone beyond what's very familiar and repetitive to you, I would venture to guess that you've probably found yourself in situations where you were disoriented and uncomfortable many, many times in spite of the fact that you tried to stay on familiar turf. If that's happened to you, I would like to propose that if you start exploring new ways and places to travel you'll find yourself, in those uncomfortable situations of being disoriented, less and less often. The reason you get into those situations is probably because you are confined to a very small bit of information about your environment. If anything happens that places you in a different spot within that environment, you're literally lost and totally without resources to re-orient yourself. But if you get out there and explore, you will be taking charge of acquiring the resources you need to reorient yourself in the event of an unexpected change in circumstances. That uncomfortable feeling of being out of control will go away because you won't be out of control anymore. Even if you *are* lost, that yucky, scary feeling won't be there because *you* will be able to take charge and work through a process of following clues that will get you back to where you need to be. Don't be afraid to experiment and explore.

Now that I've hopefully convinced you to explore more of your environment than you've done on your own in the past, I feel compelled to warn you that as you attempt to explore, people will probably bug you. They'll think you need help and try to immediately direct you to your desired location. Don't let them, unless you want the help.

If you're exploring and you're feeling sociable, you might use the opportunity to educate the public. Explain to them that while they can know everything about the room at a glance, you can only know the details by checking out the situation and familiarizing yourself with the layout and contents of the area. If you're not feeling sociable just come up with some polite two or three word lines that you feel comfortable using to decline their offer like "No thanks, I'm just looking!" That will freak them out! Play with their minds – it will be fun!

Sometimes you can completely avoid being approached by people, while you're exploring, by your stance. Explore with an attitude. Use whatever attitude the situation calls for. You might want to project an attitude of purposefulness and confidence. Or, try the "I'm enjoying the scenery" look. Or the "yes, I realize I'm walking into dead-end wall space, but that's exactly what I want to be doing" look! It's a real nonchalant look of peacefulness and total control. That alone might keep people from offering unwanted assistance. Of course if at any time you do want some help, you can either ask, or, use the "bewildered" look, which says to people, "I'm confused and I really wish you'd offer to help me."

I've pretty much been talking about venturing only slightly outside of an area you are already familiar with. Now I'll talk a little bit about how to orient yourself to a new location.

In a nutshell, think of it as a puzzle. You keep adding pieces to the puzzle as you go along until finally the puzzle is complete. In this case the pieces of your puzzle consist of information. Puzzles are meant to be fun. Now if the puzzle had already been completed from the beginning, you wouldn't have been able to enjoy the fun of putting it together, would you?

When you're traveling to a new location, get as many pieces of information as possible over the phone before you go. If that's not possible, don't worry about it. There are other ways to find the missing pieces. You'll want to know in advance how to deal with transportation issues. It is assumed that you have learned and practiced the skills to travel safely, basic mobility, before you venture out into the world. Don't be afraid to ask for assistance. The closer you get to your destination, the more likely it is that you will want to ask someone to help you pinpoint your location and fill in those final pieces to your puzzle. Be willing to explore with your cane and your senses.

If someone bothers you while you're exploring, simply thank them for their concern and tell them firmly that you are enjoying the scenery (or whatever you want to tell them to get rid of them). Or, if you wish, take advantage of their offer and ask for help. It's your choice.

If you're really a good traveler, you *will* get lost sometimes because that means you are willing to get out there and try stuff. People get lost all the time whether they are blind or sighted, smart or not smart. That's just life. When I get lost, as a sighted person, it usually means I have driven several miles out of my way, and I am inconvenienced by ½ hour or so. When a blind person is lost it may mean they have walked several blocks out of the way or gotten off the bus at the wrong stop; again, an inconvenience of ½ hour or so. The process to find our way is the same for both of us.

When I'm lost, I do everything possible to look cool. Heaven forbid anyone might notice my distress. At first I avoid asking for help until I am so far gone and my bladder is so full I am forced to finally break down and ask for directions. Does that sound familiar? I once drove 40 miles in the wrong direction because I refused to stop and ask for directions even though my surroundings didn't look quite right. I'm not quite that stubborn anymore but I still tend to avoid asking for directions. But I am getting better and better at asking for help in order to save time. Even though I don't always practice what I preach, I highly recommend that you ask for assistance if you are disoriented.

If you still don't want to ask for help, or, if there's nobody around, worry not. You simply need a different strategy. If you don't know where you are but you have enough information to find a familiar location --- anything familiar, go there. Go to that familiar location and start over. Even if you cannot get directly to your destination from the familiar location you found, **YOU ARE NOT LOST**. You know how to get *somewhere* from that location. Work through the steps of getting from your familiar location to another

familiar location until you are at a point where you can start over. By this time you might be tired and cranky and not want to go anywhere. That's fine. Just go home and take a hot bath or have a martini or whatever you need to do to relax. You can start over the next day or you might decide to chuck it all and just take a taxi; that's OK. Just know that *you were not lost*. You were only inconvenienced.

Now, if you're out there and you discover that you have no clue at all where you are, there is nothing at all that is familiar to you *anywhere*, and there are no people nearby, don't panic. Go to the nearest place where there's some activity. If you walk toward a busy street you'll likely find people, businesses, or a bus. Once you find a bus line, or a populated area you can start asking questions. If you cannot immediately ascertain where a populated area might be, make an educated guess and go that direction. Pick a direction and stick with your decision until you have a definite reason to change directions. (Discovering that you have just walked into a gunfight between gang members would be a good reason to change directions! More likely reasons might be that you recognize a landmark or something that is telling you that you're headed in the wrong direction). The idea is to make sure you don't wander around aimlessly in circles. You don't want to look like a duck in a shooting gallery pacing back and forth covering the same territory; that will get you nowhere. If you stick with the direction you picked long enough, you will eventually get enough information to help you decide whether or not you picked the best direction and what you should do next. You'll be OK. Be adventurous, have fun!

Everything I just said about venturing out of your comfort zone assumes that you already have knowledge of basic safe travel skills. That means you use your cane consistently in a manner that protects you. It also means you know how to cross streets. You should all know how to cross streets. You should be able to cross intersections with signals. You are not a good traveler unless you can do this.

When you come to an intersection, you should be able to determine the type of crossing control, if any, that you have encountered. What I mean by this is that you should, (most of the time) be able to figure out what it is you're about to cross. Does the street have a traffic signal? A two-way stop sign? A four-way stop sign? Or is it a totally uncontrolled intersection? Is it a traffic circle or 5-way intersection? You should know whether you are on a corner or about to jaywalk. You should be able to analyze the crossing situation and decide if you are at a safe place to cross. You might decide it would be better to walk a few blocks to a different location to cross. Or maybe you will discover that crossing an intersection in a different direction than you planned would be a better way to cross. For example: If you planned to cross one street but there were too many wild right turners who regularly refused to yield, you might choose to make three crossings to get to the same corner, thus avoiding the obnoxious right turners. Or, maybe you cannot hear the traffic that is supposed to be your cue to go because it is starting from the opposite side of a wide street. In that case you could make three crossings the other direction. You'd have to fight off the right turners but maybe you're really good at doing that but not so good at hearing where far away traffic is coming from. The idea here is you must learn to choose what works best for *you* in any given situation.

If you are unable to make good street crossing decisions, and cross confidently, you need training.

If you are crossing streets but you're scared when you do it, you need training.

If you walk significantly faster than your normal pace so you can 'get it over with faster' when you're crossing a street, you need training.

If you can only cross streets if they have an audible signal, you need training.

You should feel confident and comfortable with your crossing decisions.

If you need travel training and if you qualify for our services and are not receiving that training – ask for it. Your counselor might not even know that you need it because he or she sees you walk in the door just fine. You may be projecting an image of being a good traveler when deep down inside you're scared to death. If you've been trained properly, you won't be scared to travel. You should feel good about your capabilities and you should be able to travel freely and confidently anywhere you want to go.

CHOOSING A CANE

I feel very strongly that cane choice is a personal issue. You are the one who should determine what type and length of cane works best for you. When I issue a new cane, I hand my student about three different sizes of two different kinds of canes. Whichever one they gravitate toward first generally determines the length. People seem to instinctively choose a good length for themselves. Then, I encourage them to walk down the hall with the other type so they can feel the difference in the weight and handle grip. Flexibility and cane tips usually are not an issue in the beginning. But at least people are aware that other canes and tips exist and can investigate these things at a later date. After walking down the hall with two types of canes in the length of their choice, they choose what cane they like best.

I have a policy where my students can trade their cane for a different one as many times as they want. Almost everyone takes advantage of this at some point during their training. They may work with one cane for several weeks or even months, talk to other blind people and then ask to try a different cane type, tip, or length. After the trade, some people keep the new cane and some go back to their original choice. Everyone is different. Only you know what cane will work best for your needs.

Audience interaction and question & answer period...