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# Action

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## VOYAGES OF DISCOVERY

New York State of Mind  
Wheeling Around the World  
Accessing the Wild “West”

Plus:

Report from the Long Island and Orlando Independence Expos



## Return to New York



Big Apple Greeter Julie (left) showed the author how to get around New York like a pro. (Photo by Paul Margulis)

**Coming back to the Big Apple after a spinal cord injury, the author found, was a challenge to bring her back to herself.**

***By Sheri Melander-Smith***

I couldn't believe it after I made my reservations. Was I

really going to do this? Go to New York City—by myself—a woman, in a wheelchair? For ten days? Before I left, I registered for a Big Apple Greeter to show me around the city. The Big Apple Greeter is a nonprofit agency that has a program specifically for travelers with a disability. My tour of NYC with Julie, the host for Big Apple Greeter, was photographed by the professional photographer, Paul Margolis and the photographs will be used in their advertising.

Taking risks and doing things that we used to do is so beneficial to one's mental health and well being. There are things that all of us can do, regardless of our circumstances, in order to have new experiences and adventure in our lives. I also want to share some travel tips from what I learned on my trip—to help make your next vacation in the big city a little easier.

After I had spinal surgery and became paralyzed, my life changed. For the first year after, I was in so much pain that all I could do was lie in the fetal position. Slowly I started to get better, but initially, my world was very, very small. It consisted of my bed, my armchair and the comfortable surroundings of my home. In talking to people who have acquired disabilities, I discovered that many have had a similar experience. So for me, going to New York City was the culmination of what had been building up to this point for a while. Going to the biggest city by myself was an expression of my desire to take risks again. To have adventure in my life and to once

again just feel alive.

## **Brooklyn Heights**

The day after I arrived in New York, Julie, my Big Apple Greeter and Paul Margolis the photographer, met me outside of my hotel. I originally came downstairs in my regular chair but after talking with Julie and realizing that we had a full day ahead of us, I decided to go back upstairs to get my power chair. While in the city, I rented a power chair from a medical supply company and this was one of the best decisions that I could have made. The power chair served as my own individual transportation system and I was able to cover a lot of ground. Having this option made a huge difference in my trip. Julie is a 20-year veteran of New York and is used to pushing herself through the city in her wheelchair. Believe me, that takes a lot of arm strength that I just do not have!

To start our day, Big Apple Greeter arranged for an Access-a-Ride van to pick us up, we began by riding from Manhattan to Brooklyn to do some sight seeing. Brooklyn has some fantastic architecture, but many buildings are split entry, meaning that there are steps going up to a place of business and at the same time, there are steps going down to a business. This makes it impossible to visit some of the stores. There are, however, plenty of stores and shops that are at street level and have easy access for everyone.

One more thing to consider is that in NYC, most streets have a cutout at the curb but there are also many streets that don't have a cut out, so you can't get on the sidewalk or sometimes off the sidewalk—you have to go around. Sometimes, there may however be an option of using the bike path. I personally don't suggest this, as to me it feels dangerous. I rode on the sidewalk and found the lack of street cut-outs to be a problem just a few times.

After arriving in Brooklyn we set out to see the skyline of Manhattan. What a beautiful city to look at! After a couple of hours we headed back to Manhattan and that day we saw many sights including the Statue of Liberty, Macy's, Times Square, Ground Zero, Central Park, and Rockefeller Center.

After the day of seeing the sights, we stopped by a friend's home to have some tea. In the apartment building, a ramp was installed in order to make it wheelchair accessible. This is a great example of how to make buildings accessible for everyone—a simple and affordable solution.

## **Conquering Fears**

While having tea, I took some time to interview Julie, my Big Apple Greeter. Julie is an amazing woman. She lives in New York and has traveled all over the world, to Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, England, all over Europe and Africa, all in her wheelchair. I asked her how she did it and her advice to me was to, “Just

get out there and do it, figure out a way, learn how to get around and go!”



Julie showed the author how to ride the subway like a real New Yorker.

Of all the experiences I had in New York City one of my favorites was to simply use the subway. Why? Because, I was so scared to try and because this is something that I used to do all the time. In my late teens and early 20's I used to model for Eileen Ford in New York so I had taken the subway many times before—just not in a wheelchair! This to me was an act of accomplishing something that seemed so overwhelming to even try.



After my first full day in New York, accompanied by my new friends from the Big Apple Greeter, I was confident that I was able to get about New York City by myself, and have a great time. The rest of my trip was just as full of adventure. I went to see the New York City Ballet and the Broadway show *Billy Elliott*, the museums and also enjoyed many wonderful restaurants. As it turns out, taking a risk in order to have a new adventure in my life was the most fun I have had in years.

## Travel Tips

While in New York, I learned a lot about myself and I gained some experience in traveling with a disability. I want to share some important travel tips and reminders with you. In doing so, I hope that you may use this information when you plan your next vacation. This is not all the travel advice available obviously, but some of the most important in my mind.

- Make sure to call hotel before you leave to confirm that they have a wheelchair accessible room.
- If you rent medical gear, such as a power chair to get around, take a little time to familiarize yourself with it to minimize the risk of unpleasant surprises—such as running out of power or getting stuck in tight spaces.
- Travel with a cell phone and keep it handy at all times.
- I did some research and found out that there is a government supported program that provides free cell phones and minutes for those individuals that meet certain income requirements. The Web page for this program is [www.safelinkwireless.com](http://www.safelinkwireless.com)
- Sightsee during the day so that you can rest at night. Don't wear yourself out.
- Pack very light. Consider wearing things two or three times.
- Lastly, manage your expectations of people and experiences.



- What I learned in New York is that people will surprise you. For example I knew a few people in New York from my younger years. Most of them were welcoming, kind and generous but there was, to my surprise, a long-time friend who didn't want to see me. I realized then that it may not always be easy for other people to accept my situation. Other people's reaction is out of your control so when traveling, do not let that get you down. People's reaction to you or your situation has nothing to do with you but rather is a reflection of their emotional maturity and ability to love.

What I learned by traveling to NYC is that one of the best ways to bring joy into our lives is through adventure. My hope for anyone who reads this is that they decide to take a little risk and get out and do something just for fun, just for you. You will be glad you did.

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