

That Really Wasn't It

by David Tate

I first became aware of designing for accessibility when I was in architecture school.

Ten years later I was working as a designer and construction estimator for Emory University, when in 1990, congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act. I served on the campus ADA committee. I thought I knew about people with disabilities.

In 1995, the National Veterans Wheel Chair Games were held on the Emory Campus, and I volunteered.

The games were held in the summer of that year and it was hot, really hot. We were on the soccer field, no tents, no shade, just the summer sun weighing down on us, like it was trying to push us into the ground. There were several events going on simultaneously and the soccer field was full of people and wheelchairs. The event I was in charge of seemed simple enough. Participants held a slender bowling pin between their fingers and threw it underhand as far as they could. Each got three attempts and we recorded the longest throw on a clipboard.

I remember that one of the first young men to compete was unable to even grasp the pin. He sat slouched to one side of his

wheelchair, his right arm hanging limp over the arm of the chair, and appeared barely cognizant of what was going on around him. Holding the pin at one end, I put the other end of the pin in his hand, three or four times. Each time, it just slipped through his fingers. There was an older woman there with him. His mother I thought. She became increasingly frustrated with him to the point that she berated him and accused him of not trying. Eventually he sort of dropped it forward and we gave him a distance of two feet. The athletes were required to sign their names next to the recorded distance in order to authenticate their participation. I put the clipboard on the arm of the wheelchair and the pen in his hand. Almost at once, his mother grabbed the pen out of his hand and wrote his name in the box, looked at me with some disgust, and said something like "he couldn't throw the damn thing and you thought he could write his name?" She pushed the clipboard back at me, stepped behind his wheelchair, and pushed him off in a huff to the next event. Up next was a young black man also in a wheelchair. I remember thinking that if he had not been confined to a wheel chair, he would have been 6-3 or 6-4 as his legs seemed too long for the wheel chair. He was bone thin and frail. His forearm seemed about as big around as my thumb.

I handed him the pin and he threw it 10 or 12 feet on the first try, his second and third attempts were slightly less, so I recorded the distance of his first attempt. I didn't think signing his name would be any big deal. I put the clipboard on the arm of his wheel chair and then handed him the pen when his arm began shaking violently and his hand pounding against the clipboard. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't prepared for this. He seemed to sense my panic and said "hold it!" I said "I am," hoping that he meant the clipboard. Because I knew what he meant.

Before I could react, he said "no, my arm," and I realized in that instant that I didn't want to touch him, I didn't want to touch him, Why? Besides, his arm was so thin and frail, I thought it might snap in my hand. But that wasn't it. Was it because of whatever it was that put him in this wheelchair? Was it because he was black? My mind began to race and seemed to go in several directions at once.

Again I heard him say "hold it," and I reached out and grabbed his arm, his hand steadied and he wrote "John Duncan" on the clipboard. Instantly I felt as though I had really done something. In fact, I wanted to do it again. I wanted to grab the arm of every athlete competing there that day and it didn't matter if they were shaking or what they looked like. But that

feeling quickly faded, and I began to feel enormously ashamed. Ashamed that I had been afraid to touch his arm.

I doubt that John Duncan ever remembered that moment, but for me it was a moment of growth, a moment of transformation, a moment of victory. I had overcome this irrational, senseless fear. But because of that fear, and the ensuing sense of shame, I never shared this story with anyone.

I'm older now, and go easier on myself.