Senior Citizens Take on Senior Challenges

by Ken Cary

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From the Editor: This article is special to me because it comes from an unexpected source and offers thanks to someone who is a longtime personal friend of mine, a friend I once doubted when she said she was going to become a mobility instructor. I have several times apologized for doubting and do so yet again.

Turning to the author, it is fascinating to observe how people age and how they view new life opportunities. Many say they are too old to learn and shutdown when people talk with them about mobility, technology, learning once again to read, and engaging in new adventures. Ken Cary has been blind just over ten years, and at seventy-five he should give all of us pause who say "I can't," or "I am too old."

Ken wrote this story for the Braille Monitor both to motivate other blind people and to thank someone who has played a very special role in his life—both very laudable reasons to embrace the task of writing, even when it is not one's normal activity. Here is what he says:

My name is Ken Cary, I'm seventy-five years old, and I'm deaf and blind. I have neuropathy in my hands and feet, and I suffer 25 percent memory loss because of a stroke in 2003.

In 2007 I went to Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center (CCRC) in Austin, Texas. There they taught me the computer. They taught me daily living. I couldn't do Braille because of the neuropathy. They taught me industrial arts, and what I think is the most important thing they taught me is mobility.

About six months ago I went to Leader Dog in Rochester, Michigan, to be trained to receive a dog. I had just undergone five weeks of radiation, coupled with a sinus condition that torments me 24/7. They weren't aware of these things when I arrived, which affected my performance. They had a video of me which was taken at home before my illness, and they said that a different person came down to the school. They had already trained a dog for me. I told them that earlier I had walked fast. But in the condition I was in when I arrived for guide dog training, I couldn't keep up with the dog that they trained. After three days they decided the best thing was to just send me home and have me come back later when I was in better shape.

Before I left they got a lady from DARS to come over and check my mobility skills. The people with leader dog weren't with her. She did this independently. She took me through alleys and pastures, down highways, and on streets where I did curb travel and shoreline. She took me to places where there were trees I had to navigate around. When she got through, she said, "Mr. Cary, I want to know who taught you how to do this because you have excellent mobility skills, and I think you could go all over the United States and the world, as far as that goes, and you could do it by yourself. My opinion is that you don't need a dog. Who was your instructor?"

Now we’re getting closer to the lady I want to talk about. At Criss Cole my first mobility instructor was Marion Small. She was an excellent instructor, but she taught me the basic things, and I wasn't with her but for about three months. She was a character; I called her Showbiz Small because she liked to dance with you out there and get you mixed up to see if you could cross the road and line up to the street. She was real outgoing, altruistic, and had a positive mental attitude.

Then I was moved to another team and got Jane Lansaw as an instructor. Jane was the total opposite of Marion. At first I didn't like her. She was all business, and her goal was to teach me everything about mobility. She told me to carry a bag and always have a raincoat in it because we didn't come in for rain, snow, or windstorm. Our sessions were for two hours. There would have to be severe lightning for us to come in before the two hours were up.

Not many deaf-blind people go to Criss Cole. There are only legally blind and totally blind people who are there. Consequently a lot of instructors there didn't have an opportunity or didn't know how to train mobility trainers for the deaf-blind. Jane really got interested in this. To help me and others, she had to come up with some new techniques she didn't use with her regular students. She made signs for me that I could use when I would go on a travel lesson using the bus. I would hold up a sign saying "Bus 5," and then another one that said "Bus 38," which I used a lot. She got hooked up with our deaf-blind specialist, Kathy Young, and she had a bunch of knowledge that Jane didn't have. Jane also got a lot of stuff from Helen Keller [the Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youth and Adults] with techniques that Ann Sullivan used, and these she used to train me. She also made a sign that said "taxi" that I would hold up when trying to get a cab. Another sign that I carried said, "I am deaf and blind, and I have trouble crossing busy, high-traffic streets. Would you help me cross the street by touching my left shoulder?" I carried these signs wherever I went, and I had some cards made up that I gave the bus drivers that said the same thing. They also told the drivers I was hard of hearing and instructed them to talk really loud to me when I needed to get off the bus.

I spent hours with Jane Lansaw in training. I didn't know it, but she was sharing techniques with interns from out of town so they could learn by seeing how I was performing. Often I would get mixed up, disoriented, and she would let me mess up, even if it took hours. She would stay with me until I figured out where I was supposed to be going. It was unbelievable the patience that she had.

One time I was having trouble finding the warehouse, the place at the center where we would sometimes meet and where we could buy supplies. It was simple for everyone else, but I was having a terrible time finding it, so I had a digital recorder, and she dictated the instructions on it. I was following those instructions the best I could, but I still crossed the road where I wasn't supposed to and rewound the recorder to read the instructions again. I realized I made a mistake and corrected it. I would go forward several blocks and would then decide that I needed to go back. I was going back and forth, constantly going back to my recorder, and I finally got to the warehouse. Of course, Jane had enough confidence in me that she remained at Criss Cole, believing I could and should go by myself.

When I got to the warehouse, I made them sign a letter saying that I made it there, because I didn't think she would believe that I did it. When I finally got back, she could see me coming, and, when she saw that letter from the warehouse, we both started jumping up and down, and she was hugging me, and we were acting like two crazy people out there, because this was a major accomplishment for me.

She liked to make me go to the University of Texas and walk the main drag. There are thousands of students there, and Jane would give me addresses of businesses that I had to find. It was either north or south of where I was. I found out that, when I went inside a business, most of the employees didn't even know their street address, which really complicated it.

One time she and one of her interns were in a business that I was supposed to find. I walked by it three times and thought about stopping, but I said to myself that “No one would stop at this place.” So I just went about my business and went back the other way. I went into a building, and for some reason my arm started to bleed really badly. I take Plavix and aspirin, and if I hit something, I really bleed. The manager said, "You are losing blood," and gave me a paper towel and said, "You need to leave our business and go clean yourself up somewhere." So I knew I had to go back home because I was going to have sunstroke I was so hot. There was no way I could get in touch with Jane, so I went back to the center, and after about an hour and a half she called in and said, "Has Ken Cary checked in?"

"Yes he has. He checked in, and he checked out again, and he's going to the warehouse by himself.”

She said, "Well you tell him I'm going to wring his neck when I get in." When she came back and got all the information, she knew I had made the right decision.

In my team at Criss Cole they were always inviting people they thought were the best mobility people to walk to the Capital, which was four miles, and they had to wear a blindfold. They never thought I was good enough to do that, so one Saturday I did it on my own. I recorded every step on my Milestone digital recorder. After about two hours I got to the Capital, and a guy had been watching me. He said, "You finally made it to the Capital." I guess he was surprised. I went over and had a lady that worked there stamp a piece of paper saying that I had been to the Capital. After I had gone there, I had a friend that took the information off the recorder and put it on a disk. I waited for about a week and gave it to Jane. She couldn't believe it and mentioned it in the auditorium at the center. I got the Traveler of the Week award.

On bad weather days Jane would take me in a room and explain how Austin was laid out. She explained that there is a river that runs through Austin so you kind of keep up with Austin by how many roads are north or south of the river. What she explained seemed to me to be kind of a complicated process, but after you studied it, it would help you find addresses better. She would send me out on drop-offs, sometimes out in the middle of Austin, and say, "Get home." Supposedly they would go back to the center, but I think they were watching me from far away with binoculars to see if I was heading the right way to get back. When on these trips, you could ask people, "Where is the closest bus station," and if they wanted to help you, you could let them help you get there. We did these drop-offs several times, and one time I lucked out and just got on the right bus and beat them home. I was sitting, waiting on them, and they couldn't believe that I got there first.

Jane Lansaw loves to work with deaf and blind people. When new deaf and blind people come into Criss Cole, she gets them, and she tells them about me. It encourages them because Jane knows that, since I left Criss Cole, I have been to Detroit, Michigan, by myself. I've been to Disney World in Florida four or five times by myself. I have been to the Chicago Airport, Denver Airport, Atlanta Airport—you name it, I've done it by myself. To accomplish this I have had to ask a lot of questions.

I live in a small town, and I go to the post office by myself about once a week. I have to travel by the schoolhouse to get there. It's about four blocks down to Highway 69, and there are 150,000 cars that pass by there every day both ways. It is a very dangerous road. When you are deaf-blind your primary travel problem is not jumping out in front of traffic; it is the turning lanes that you can't hear as well, and you've got to be sure that you don't jump out in front of a car in a turning lane. If I'm not sure, I will use my sign for asking someone to help me. I am not going to do something stupid.

Once I cross the street heading to the post office, I go through parking lots; I pass a couple of small, narrow alleys that could be roads; I walk through grass and finally find the post office. Of course I have to come back home after I go to the post office. This requires a lot of mobility skills that I learned from Jane Lansaw. I just want to say thank you, Jane. You gave me my life back, so I don't have to sit down and watch TV all day and be afraid to go anywhere.

Since working with Jane, I have gone to skydive in San Marcos, and I jumped out nine times to beat former President George H. Bush's tandem jump record. I took jumps eight and nine the same day to accomplish that. Fortunately, President Bush has quit jumping. During the process, every time I thought I had him beat, he would go jump out again, and I had it in my head I was going to break his record. I started jumping at age sixty-seven, did my most recent jump at seventy-four, am now seventy-five, and I will not quit jumping. When I die, I want it to be when I’m swinging a cane while jumping out of an airplane. Thanks, Jane.