

Never Underestimate a Blind Man

When I first met Charlie in 1988, I had no idea how to treat him. I had never known a blind person before and had no idea how to respond. His wife, Kathie, who came to me as a client and quickly became a friend, told me she met Charlie when she worked at the blind school in Pittsburgh while he was a student there. Therefore, I knew he was blind before I met him, I just did not know how to act.

Luckily, our first meeting was at a party, among a group of their friends. I was able to observe how everyone else acted toward him and was amazed. Nobody treated him as if he was disabled. He was not catered to, led around or watched over. They teased and joked with him, and he had to get his own beer, like everybody else. He always knew where the keg was.

He was also the line judge for the deadly serious games of volleyball the guys played. I was amazed with his sense of hearing. When he said a ball sounded in or outside the lines, nobody argued with him. More important than that, he was able to keep score and remember it while drinking.

As I got to know him, I began to admire his abilities. He was in charge of his life and let nothing overwhelm him. He was able to do many things that sighted people could not. This made me look at all "handicapped" people in a different way. I realized that, although life may be different for them, it was no less wonderful. The lack of some abilities tended to increase other abilities. I learned never to underestimate a blind man because he could do anything.

Charlie's ability to do mathematics in his head was incredible. He was self-employed, as a food concession operator, and able to handle most of his work himself, even cook. He recognized all his friends and customers by voice and, amazingly, by their footsteps, and greeted them by name as they approached him. He ran his cash drawer, made change and totaled up his accounts at the end of the day. His wife had to do all the writing. She filled out his paperwork and wrote the checks but he had a very clear grasp of the business and finances.

I started dating, and later married, one of his friends and was included in many outings with Charlie. He was with us when the gang went to a water park. He did not miss anything. The guys took him clear to the top of the highest waterslide and he loved the ride down. He teased me because I, being afraid of heights, would not go all the way up there. I laughed and told him, if he could see where they were taking him, he would not go either.

In that case, I wished I could not see, because I bet that ride WAS fun, I just could not do it. However, I was waiting at the bottom when they came down. It was funny when the employee at the bottom answered the phone call from the employee at the top. They always freaked that a blind man was coming down and would not know what to do. I would ease their mind by saying I would take care of him. Charlie came whooshing down and, when he stopped, I would be at the end of his lane. All I had to do was call his name and he would walk right to me.

His hearing was acute. He was able to hear everything, from apparently a mile away, and could keep several conversations straight at the same time. At a party, if he heard something at the other end of the room that intrigued him, he called out a comment and became part of that discussion.

He was born and raised in Pittsburgh and knew the city inside out. He moved his business there a decade ago but his wife and children wanted to continue to live in this town. He rented an apartment in downtown Pittsburgh where he lived and got back and forth from work by bus. He was able to travel all over the city and do anything he desired. On the weekends, he came home and returned by bus.

His siblings spoke of his confident attitude as a child. He had a small amount of vision then and that was enough for him. They said he did everything everybody else did and usually faster. They spoke of his crazy bicycle riding and wild stunts in the streets of Pittsburgh.

He had a map of the city in his head. Last year, when my mother was in Shadyside hospital, I made a wrong turn on my way home and ended up terribly lost. I was tired and stressed, and could not figure out where I was or where I should go. I got Charlie on my cell phone and he asked for two cross streets then told me he knew exactly where I was. He started giving me incredibly detailed directions. How many blocks until I turned left or right onto the next street, was impressive. However, when he asked if I saw the fire station and a stonewall on my right, I was amazed! How did he know that?

Clearly, this man “saw”! Not the same way a sighted person does but he had clear mental images of the world as he “saw” it! He held those images in his head and navigated with confidence.

He loved football and was a Steeler fan his whole life. He loved to go to games with his buddies. He had a transistor radio on which he listened to the game. Often he would tell the guys things that they did not know yet, as part of the audience. He loved being part of the crowd, surrounded by the excitement of a stadium full of people.

He just loved sports. He managed a softball team for five years. The team went to the playoffs all five years and won the championship in four of them. He was very proud that his son was his star player in the left field. He cheered for his daughter, when she was on her high school volleyball team.

He was a great chess player and in two bowling leagues. He traveled all over the United States to tournaments for both activities. He was very proud of himself the year he won all of the events in a bowling tournament. He always came home with huge trophies for bowling or chess, and his wife said she did not know how he managed them, with his suitcase and his cane, on a plane or bus.

He was intelligent and continued to educate himself through TV, radio and talking books. He stayed abreast of current events and was very opinionated. He had a terrific mind full of trivia. Our group often played Trivial Pursuit. He was very good at it. I knew for sure, if the question was about sports or music, he knew it!

When I first met Charlie, recently separated from my first husband, I was struggling physically, emotionally and financially as a single parent. He was always sympathetic, but would not allow me to wallow in self-pity. He always encouraged me and expressed confidence in my ability to do anything necessary. Coming from him, that sentiment had special meaning. After all, he never let problems stop him. His children felt the same way. When he told them to be tough and keep on working to succeed at anything they wanted, they looked at his accomplishments and believed him.

He was a proud and independent man. Although eligible for social security disability, he chose to work and support himself and his family his whole life. He just was not a sit-around-and-take kind of person. He wanted to be going and doing and accomplishing all the time.

Sometimes this caused problems. He cut his big toe off while mowing the lawn one day. When he slipped and slid down the bank, he did not let go of the handle as a sighted person would. He held on to it because that is how he knew where it was. The motor kept running, the blade kept turning and his foot slid under. He accepted the loss of his toe with the same attitude he accepted the constant bruises and cuts on his legs from walking into things. It was just one of those things! He would say, “It doesn’t hurt, that is why God gave me tough shins”.

One of his regrets was that he could not drive. However, he did get one chance. When the car was stuck in a snowdrift in their driveway, he thought Kathie was not rocking it properly. In her frustration, she told him to do it, if he thought he could do better. He jumped behind the wheel and went to it. When the car broke loose, he zoomed out the driveway! Don't panic! They lived on a cul-de-sac and there was a large empty paved circle there. He careened all the way across it and partway up the bank on the other side, before stopping. He did not see how close he came to taking out the mailbox or hitting a utility pole, he was just delighted as a child to be in the driver's seat with his foot on the pedal!

When he died last summer, I grieved, along with his family and many other friends. His memorial service, though, was a celebration of his life. Although we cried because of our sense of loss, we could not stop remembering the good times we all enjoyed with him. There was as much laughter as tears.

As we all spoke of him and told our stories of him, it became very clear that we all respected, admired and were inspired by him. He never considered himself handicapped and never let the little detail of being "visually challenged" stop him from doing everything he wanted and experiencing his life to the fullest.

**In Memory of a Good Friend
Charles Vidunas, 1949-2006**

Patricia Kenworthy November 2006