

I DO NOT ALLOW MYSELF TO BE CARRIED

By Nadina LaSpina

I do not allow myself to be carried.

Oh, I know, it would be no problem - for you. I'm sure you could get two strong men (don't even have to be that strong) to carry up the stairs my ultra-light wheelchair and my body in it. Ultra-light too my body, especially if I choose not to wear my artificial legs.

You say you really want me to speak at your event. You never thought when you thought of asking me that there would be a problem. Not something one thinks of, inaccessibility, is it?

Unfortunately, it is impossible to move the event to an accessible location, you say. Unfortunately, the project has so little money, barely enough to survive. Not a cent can be spared for accessibility.

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I know. You do not understand why I'd refuse the help you offer with such kindness.

Would you be as kind if I didn't come alone? My life partner, you know, is a wheelchair user too. He'd want to hear me speak. And I'd want him in the audience. He can be carried also, you say? You should know, though, his is not an ultra-light manual chair but a 500-pound motorized one.

And would it be ok if I bring a few friends along? Yes, wheelchair users also. I like the feeling of support I get from having a few friends in the audience when I speak, don't you?

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I only go to places where I can roll in on my own. You walk and I roll, we go in together as equals. If I'm carried we stop being equals. I become the unfortunate one who needs help. You may not have been paying attention, but we've been fighting for over thirty years now to change this society, which would rather give us charity than equal rights.

But what better way is there to call attention to the problem of inaccessibility than having people see me being carried? you ask.

Oh, I could think of a few ways. I could sit with my friends in front of the building holding signs and giving out flyers to those who go in. That would get their attention, don't you think? If we really got angry we could block the doors: "I can't get in, so neither will you." Oh, that would turn people against us, you say. Some people, for sure. But it would get us attention, the universally craved media attention. Especially if the police were called. Especially if there were some arrests. Another way to go, of course, would be the courts. We could file a lawsuit under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Oh, please, don't get nervous! I was only speaking hypothetically. I know that your project has barely enough money to survive.

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Oh, yes, I have been carried in my life.

As a child in Sicily, I didn't have a wheelchair. I had to be carried everywhere. My mother would carry me: "I have to pee, mamma." "O please, not again, my back is killing me, can't you hold it?"

As I got too heavy for my mother, my father would carry me. And if my father wasn't there, an uncle, or any male teenage cousin would do. "You got nice titties, little cousin." "Don't touch!" "How can I carry you without touching?"

Later, on the new continent, I had a wheelchair, but so many places where my wheelchair couldn't go. A boyfriend would carry me. Maybe one I did not much care for but who could get me where I wanted to go. Compromises all of us women have made sometime in our lives. The price always our dignity, our self-respect.

Yes, I have been carried in my life.

I've been carried when visiting countries where accessibility is a luxury unheard of. Where disabled people get carried customarily and routinely, much as I did as a child in Sicily.

I remember sitting in my fancy American wheelchair in Nairobi and watching disabled people crawling on the sidewalks. Ashamed of my being privileged, unable to show my solidarity by getting out of my chair and crawling with them, I allowed myself to be carried there.

I don't travel to many far away places anymore. But if I should in the future, I may be carried again.

Many times the police have carried me, when they arrested me for civil disobedience. At times they carried me in my chair, other times I was taken out of my chair. One year, in Albany, when 8 of us were arrested after sitting-in in the Governor's office, the police pushed me in my chair outside and had me sitting at the top of the steps of an inaccessible entrance to the Capitol building. Only for a few minutes. But it was February, after midnight, and I didn't have a coat. The action had started with a demonstration at the Department of Health and that's where I had left my coat. When the police took me out of my chair to carry me down the steps and into the police car I was thankful. The policeman's arms felt warm and good around my shaking body.

Though I keep saying I'm getting too old, I know my activist days are not over. Many battles remain to be fought. And unfortunately not many of us are able and willing to go all the way and get arrested when necessary. Chances are I'll get carried again by the police.

I don't know under what other circumstances I would allow myself to be carried.

What would I do if I found myself trapped in a burning tower? Would I sit in solidarity with the quadriplegic colleague in the heavy power chair, who could not be carried down thousands of stairs? Sit breathing in smoke together till the tower went down? Or would I cry helplessly, would I beg any strong man to carry me down, would I make any deal, any compromise, would I forget all about the quadriplegic colleague, my dignity, my pride, to save my life?

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