

EDUCATIONAL
By Nadina LaSpina

Crossing 14th Street at Sixth Avenue, heading south on my way to 66 W. 12th, the New School building where the classes I teach are held, I notice that alongside me is a woman holding a 5 or 6-year-old girl by the hand. The woman is smiling broadly at me. I'm sure I've never seen her before but I give her half a smile as I aim for the curb cut.

I'm in a hurry, as is often the case when I'm going to work. When I drove to Fordham University in the Bronx, or took the bus uptown to Hunter College, I would always be early for class, sometimes as much as an hour early. I gave myself plenty of time, then, in case I would have trouble finding a parking spot, or would get stuck in traffic, or, worse, get stuck on the bus if the wheelchair lift broke down. I don't need to worry about such things now, since all I have to do to get to work is roll down a few blocks. So I don't bother to give myself extra time. But that means I can't afford to stop and chat if I happen to run into a friend or acquaintance. Today I'm already a few minutes behind schedule because a phone call delayed me. My class is to start in exactly twelve minutes. So I hope this smiling woman is not someone who will claim to know me and expect me to try and remember her name.

I give my wheels two strong turns and easily get ahead of her. But the sidewalk is crowded, I can't go fast. I hear the woman right behind me talking to her little girl. "That lady is disabled," she's telling her. "She's in a wheelchair. Look how she turns the wheels to make it go!" Isn't that interesting? Usually mothers tell their children not to look. "Don't embarrass the lady by staring, darling. She doesn't need to be reminded of her misfortune." That's how the scene usually unfolds. That's the script we've all gotten used to. This must be a new version, a more enlightened one. This woman must have read the articles that say it is better to explain disability to children rather than create fears by making it a taboo subject. And she has learned that the trick is to accentuate the positive, focusing on those aspects a child can relate to. That's not hard to do with a wheelchair, since children are naturally attracted to anything with wheels. "It really does look like fun, doesn't it?" I hear her saying right behind me. "I bet it can go really fast, don't you think?" Well, I really would love to take off and show them how fast I can go. But I'm now at the corner of 13th Street and have to stop for the red light.

The woman comes up alongside me and again smiles broadly at me. I make believe I don't notice her and, my hands on the wheels, I stare at the traffic light, ready to take off the moment it turns green. "Would you like to say hello to the lady?" the woman is now asking the little girl. Oh, no. I can't very well refuse to say hello to a child, can I? Luckily, the light changes right at that moment. So I give the little girl a quick smile and I take off, hoping they'll go left on 13th.

But no such luck. They're right behind me again. Encouraged by my smile, the woman is now determined to stop me. "Excuse me, excuse me," she's calling as she tries to catch up with me, pulling, I imagine, the little girl by the hand. "Would you mind if my daughter takes a look at your wheelchair?" Hasn't she looked enough? I want to complain. But I do

slow down, which encourages the woman even more. She's smiling more broadly than ever now that she's caught up with me. "Would you mind if she pushes you down the block?" she asks. I can't believe this. Just what I need when I'm running late - to have a 5 year old push me.

Now, I'm no scrooge. I like children. I've had children push my chair, ride on my lap, stand on my footrests, hang on my backpack countless times. But I look at my watch and I only have 7 minutes to get to the classroom. "Yes, I would mind," I say trying not to sound cross. "I'm sorry, but I'm in an awful hurry." The smile freezes on the woman's face. She pulls the little girl closer to her as if to protect her from the aura of bitterness suddenly emanating from me and my wheelchair.

But then she decides to give it another try. "We're going the same way," she mutters. "My daughter was admiring your wheelchair. I didn't think you'd mind..." "It's just that I'm in a hurry," I say. "I teach at the New School and I'm due in class in a few minutes." And I point towards 12th Street as I start to move again. "Oh!" the woman stares at me, apparently surprised by the revelation that I too have a life, I don't exist solely for her child's entertainment. Then she bends down to make sure her daughter shares her amazement. "The lady is a teacher!" she exclaims. But the little girl doesn't seem at all impressed. Suddenly the woman's face lights up: "Just let her push you to the end of the block," she says, smiling broadly again. "It would be so educational for her!"

Isn't that brilliant? To appeal to my sense of duty as a teacher? How can I pass up the opportunity to educate a child on the fine art of being disabled? After all, aren't we supposed to be "educational" these days? That's the progress we've made. No longer will we allow them to think we're "pitiful!" Piss on pity! And oh, no! we don't want help, we're not "helpless!" Nor will we let them call us "heroic," or "inspirational" when we're just living our lives. But we'll agree to be "educational." We'll even run workshops to teach the nondisabled about us, teach them not to be afraid of us...

But I don't want to educate, not today, not on this 6th Avenue sidewalk, not for free, not when I'm in a hurry. I want to save my teaching for the classroom, and I want to get to that classroom on time. "I'm sorry," I say, as I start moving faster, "you're really making me late now." I'm almost at the corner and I can see the light is still green but starting to flash. I make a run for it leaving the mother and daughter behind. Turning east on 12th Street, I quickly make my way to the New School building, hoping I'll get an elevator immediately. My class starts in three minutes. As I turn to enter the building, I look back towards 6th Avenue and I see the woman and the little girl just starting to cross the street. So the little girl didn't get to learn what it feels like to push a wheelchair. Good! Let her lesson be not to bother a busy woman on her way to work.

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