

The Tactile Traveler script Show #23

Nick Isenberg

From KDNK Community access Radio in Carbondale, Colorado, in the United States this is program #23 of the TACTILE TRAVELER-EMPOWERING BLIND AND LOW VISION PEOPLE TO EXPLOR THE WORLD AND HELPING OUR SIGHTED FRIENDS SEE THE WORLD IN A NEW WAY.

I'M Nick Isenberg.

When blind people go places, we don't experience them like our sighted friends. We don't see beautiful mountains, or romantic sunsets. The goal of this program is to identify and even create experiences that are more meaningful, or just more fun for us and for our sighted traveling companions. Frequently as people loose their eyesight, they become more and more isolated.

The Tactile Traveler hopes to empower people not only to go literally around the world, but around the block to new adventures in their lives.

Blind ranges from people who are visually impaired and glasses and contact lenses no longer help them to live a normal life to people, like me who are totally blind. And to sighted parents who have a blind child to blind parents who have sighted children And blind parents with blind children.

And, people of all ages, interests and physical abilities.

On today's program:

How being assertive can make life more fun for both blind and sighted people

The subway station of the future for blind and low vision and blind riders is already here in a city in South Korea

And Insights on better ways to describe things to those of us who can't see them

During the late 1960's and 70's something called assertiveness training, a way of expressing your wishes, needs and opinions while respecting those of others, became very popular here in the United States. Assertiveness training was and is useful because many of us have grown up being taught not to be assertive. Things like, "children should be seen and not heard," "women should be subservient to men," ,

“that’s not, feminine,” and “we don’t talk like that in this family. And a never ending list of ways we are programmed that our feelings, needs and wishes should be kept to ourselves.

People who were going both to therapy and assertiveness training were finding that assertiveness training was helping them more than the therapy, because it gave them concrete tools for taking more control of their lives.

Part of that was because of how therapy was practiced at that time.

JIM STOKES: As you see Freudian or more psycho analytic therapy is a very long, drawn out process of exploring your past and understanding how that affects your current life.

NICK: Blind psychologist and University of Denver adjunct professor Jim Stokes, PhD, says therapy has changed from learning what Freud said caused your problems to concrete ways to take control of your life.

DR STOKES: People are being encouraged to be more active and takes steps to improve their situation and now there’s direct paths to making changes in your life.

NICK: And many of those steps include what was taught in Assertiveness training.

Most of us who could always learn to be more assertive aren’t in therapy, we’re missing out on some concrete things we can do that would make our lives more fun. And DR. Stokes says being assertive is especially useful to people who are blind.

STOKES: Blind people might be with a sighted person and others will speak to the sighted person and as if the blind person isn’t even there because you allow others to take charge so it helps to feel like you have some control over your environment.

NICK: Retired blind teacher of the blind, Hannah Fairbairn realized that students needed assertive skills while teaching at the Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Massachusetts.

So, she developed what she calls “assertive speech,” specifically for us, which she incorporates into her book “When You Can’t Believe Your Eyes: Vision Loss and Personal Recovery:.”

HANNAH FAIRBAIRM: I had already realized from my own experience and from my work at the Carrol Center, this was in the early 2000’s that people losing vision at that time had absolutely no way of finding out except maybe through family or friends what was the best ways of dealing with vision loss or what the different kinds of vision types

were, what good rehab was, etc, etc., etc., absolutely they and I, back in that day, were so dependant on teachers and others and I felt that was terrible. And then a couple of adult students at the Carroll Center nearing the end of their program of vision rehab and they came to me and said “You know, we need some group classes in spoken communication.

NICK: Hannah says the most important part of being assertive is being very clear.

HANNAH: Assertive speech is a way of speaking that tells whoever you’re talking to in a firm, clear way what you need, what you don’t need, what you refuse or how you’re feeling according to that situation, but the main thing about it is that it’s positive and firm and really clear. It’s not at all sort of nervous or anxious or angry or letting things pass that really you need to address, you need to talk about. So that’s what assertive speech is. It’s not being bossy. It’s being firm in your own defense.

NICK: Hannah uses as an example when you ask for a personal shopper in a store, even though that person probably doesn’t know they’re called a personal shopper.

HANNAH: So what you’re going to do is you’re going to coach the person you’re talking to in the way you need help. So for instance, supposing you’re going to the pharmacy, I would say maybe I’d listen for the register and I’d go up to it and say “Can you find me someone who knows the store well (that’s important) to give me a hand here. I need a few things. And then I say to the person who is going to help me, “I have very little sight. I can follow you or I can take your elbow.” I ‘m teaching them how I’d like to be helped. And then when we get to actually picking out the toothpaste I’d say “please can you hand everything to me first, because I don’t want some things to get put in to a basket or cart I have not held in my hand because maybe they’re only giving me the tiny size and I need the big jumbo size or the reverse. Or maybe the packaging just doesn’t feel the way it normally does and maybe they had given me something else. That’s the kind of way you’re always coaching for assistance the way that you need helped.

NICK: Hannah says it’s important to have some phrases that you’re comfortable with that you can use all the time, such as, “I’m blind, would you mind then fill in the blank with reading the menu to me or guide me to the restroom, for example if you’re in a restaurant. Or when a well-meaning person tries to guide you somewhere by grabbing your arm and starts pushing you, you’re ready to say, “May I walk a half step behind you and hold your elbow, before you fall down a flight of stairs, or trip and fall flat on your face on a cement sidewalk.

Hannah says it might be easier to practice assertive speech with strangers like clerks in stores with family and friends who aren’t used to you sticking up for your rights. Like

when they tell you that you can't use a stove or sharp knife. You will be comfortable saying, "I learned to use stoves and knives at the center for the blind."

Hannah says, until assertive speech is natural to you, practice.

HANNAH: Using assertive speech takes practice and you want to practice because you need to keep it short, friendly and clear but at the same time state your needs according to how you feel about things. So you need to practice, practice, practice. First of all maybe by yourself or with a friend on the phone or when we get back to in person support groups, online support groups, also practice there. It's great to practice with a few other people with vision loss because you can get some great feedback and useful tips working together.

NICK: Hannah Fairbairn[spelled F A I R B A I R N] BOOK "When You Can't Believe Your Eyes: Vision Loss and Personal Recovery," HAS LOTS MORE ON ASSERTIVE SPEECH AND TIPS ON MAKING BEING LOW VISIONED OR BLIND EASIER. It's available on Amazon, Google Playbooks, Book Share, and BARD Talking Books.

Other books on assertive training available from the Talking Books Library are: "When I say no, I feel guilty how to cope—using the skills of systematic assertive therapy," "Civilized assertiveness for women : communication with backbone," and "Don't say yes when you want to say no."

Blair Northwood, Sharon Hughey, and Andrea Loughry Helped with this story.

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You're listening to the Tactile Traveler-EMPOWERING BLIND AND LOW VISION PEOPLE TO explore THE WORLD AND HELPING OUR SIGHTED FRIENDS SEE THE WORLD IN A NEW WAY.

I'M Nick Isenberg.

South Korea's second largest city is trying to make public transportation more accessible for riders with a visual disability. Earlier this year Busan launched new technology that could help passengers travel independently. The Tactile Traveler's Jason Strother has the story.

JASON STROTHER: Park Hyung-bae doesn't leave home much without help from his mother or another guide.

The 32-year-old says navigating Busan's public transportation isn't comfortable for someone who is blind.

((PARK HYOUNG-BAE in Korean under English translation, Establish and fade under))

When I've traveled without my family or someone to guide me, I've gotten lost and asked people where I am, Park says. But sometimes they ignore me, and I have no idea if they have walked away or not. It makes me feel isolated. It is hard to ask for help, he says.

((END ACT))

But now, smart technology inside a Busan metro station could help people with visual impairments travel more independently.

Park is trying out a smartphone app called Ta Ga Chi Na Ran Hee, or Side By Side.

It locates users with GPS and provides meter by meter directions to station amenities.

((SFX- Phone voice))

Park uses his phone's text to speech software to listen to the directions.

It tells him to walk straight for 98-meters.

He arrives at one of two accessible information kiosks that's connected to Bluetooth beacons placed all around the station.

The system speaks out loud and has a Braille touch pad that turns into a tactile map of the facility.

((PARK HYOUNG-BAE - ACT 2 (In Korean under English translation, Establish and fade under))))

Park says when he selects a destination, the Braille display lets him feel the layout of the station and then he can memorize where he needs to go.

((END ACT))

So far, the new tech is just in one subway station.

But city officials say they plan to expand the app's coverage and install kiosks in all of the metro's 114 stations.

Jeon Byeong-jun is with the Busan Transportation Corporation.

((JEON BYEONG-JUN/Korean, paraphrase)) ((Korean under English translation, Establish and fade under))

He says this technology is not just for people with disabilities, it can be convenient for pregnant women and the elderly. It has multiple languages, so even foreign visitors can use it. It is for everyone, Jeon adds.

((END ACT))

Smart technology could benefit everyone, if it is made with universal design.

That's according to the Seoul-based firm Dot, which partnered with Busan and built the accessible kiosk.

Go Mi-sook, who handles customer service, says one way to do that is to bring more people who are blind to the table.

((GO MI-SOOK ACT (In Korean, under English translation, Establish and fade under))

She says from her perspective as a person with a visual disability, there is a difference in how people without a disability think about making products that can be used by someone who is blind. Go says that's why it is important that visually impaired people be part of the planning and design process.

((END ACT))

((SFX-train ambi, Establish and fade under))

Back at the Busan metro station, Park Hyoung-bae says inclusive tech does not just improve mobility.

((PARK HYOUNG-BAE ACT3/ Korean, under English translation, Establish and fade under))

Non-disabled people don't often see people with a disability using the subway, he says. If this technology makes it easier for us to use public transportation, I think the overall all perception of people with disabilities will improve.

((END ACT))

And that, he adds, can bring down social barriers.

NICK: Thank you Jason.

You're listening to the Tactile Traveler-EMPOWERING BLIND AND LOW VISION PEOPLE TO explore THE WORLD AND HELPING OUR SIGHTED FRIENDS SEE THE WORLD IN A NEW WAY.

I'M Nick Isenberg.

One of our continuing challenges is understanding what's around us. Especially when we're traveling to new places. That includes more meaningful ways for our sighted traveling companions to describe things to us.

I thought a person who was blind and now is able to see might have insights that might help us.

Connie Parke is one of those people. She went blind in 2003. Doctors in Montana and Utah misdiagnosed the cause of her blindness. And told her that she would be blind forever and there was nothing that could be done to help her.

Then in 2018 her husband mentioned to the doctor at the University of Colorado Hospital that his wife was blind and was having problems with blisters on her eyes.

The doctor immediately sent her to eye specialists at the hospital. One of them told her that her blindness was caused by extremely thick cataracts and that surgery might improve her life. But made no guarantees. They were pleasantly shocked to find that she could see 20-20 in both eyes the day after her surgeries.

Now that Connie can see again, she and her husband are re-Visiting many of the places they went to when she was blind and she realized something.

CONNIE: I've always been adventurous and when I lost my sight that never stopped. And so he would take me, we lived in Colorado. He would take me to the Oregon coast to visit my family. He would take me to the mountains of Montana to see his family and

we would go through Yellowstone National Park on our way back and he would describe what he would see, what he was looking at and what he described did not compare to what I saw. He would tell me there were trees and they were pine and they were green and what I saw was many different colors of green and I had precise vision where I could actually see the pine needles on the trees. He took me through Yellowstone and I HEARD Old Faithful. He tried to describe Old Faithful to me, but to see Old Faithful with your actual eyesight was nothing like what he had described to me what he was seeing.

NICK: Connie's husband did a much better job of making Bonnie aware of her surroundings than most people. When they were on a trail in the woods, he would stop and have her feel the needles on the pine trees. Since Connie had seen in the past, it would have been more meaningful, if her husband had talked about the many shades of green.

Duncan Larsen, who is sighted, is in charge of PROGRAMS FOR SENIORS at the Colorado Center for the Blind in Littleton, Colorado. But in 1978, she began a career at what is now known as the Nebraska Commission for the Blind.

As part of her training, she had to wear Sleep shades, a brand of very effective blindfolds for three months.

DUNCAN LARSON: The Sleep Shade training was very intensive. I wore the Sleep Shades from 8 to 5, over the lunch hour. I would often wear them home at night, and I would sometimes wear them on the weekends for activities that we did so it was a very intensive experience.

NICK: Between her Sleep Shades experience and forty-three years of working with blind people, Duncan has developed a skill that would be handy for anyone to learn who has an important person in their life who is blind. She thinks like a blind person.

DUNCAN: Prior to my training I really didn't know any blind people. I was hired, I got involved in the training and then I got to know lots of blind people. I made a lot of blind friends with people I worked with and with students. I'm not sure how it's different. Sighted people just use their visual sense. They are not necessarily

Since Connie had seen in the past, it would have been more meaningful, if her husband had talked about the many shades of green.

One of the most frequent ways people don't do a good job of describing things is when they give us directions. Connie Parke/.

CONNIE: The one thing that upset me more than anything was "Did you see that? Look at here. It's over there. Well, it's right there! It's right in front of you." Those things

bothered me more than anything because when you don't have eyesight you don't know "over there."

DUNCAN: For example when a person's asking for directions if someone says "Go to your left and then blah blah blah. It's really helpful for the person to point. "Ok, you mean this way." And point to the left and confirm with the stranger that that is really what they meant because it's often turned around. It's almost more often turned around than it is correct. Because they're facing you, so it may be their left, but your right. So it's really good just to point. "Oh you mean this way" and then they'll say "yes" or they'll say "no, no, no I meant this way, sorry I meant the other way." And nobody's trying to trip up anybody. It's just that people often don't think in terms of directions and how to give directions.

NICK: If you have an important person in your life with vision problems , you can get a better feel for what it's like to be blind by wearing Sleep Shades and borrowing one of our white canes, like Duncan did. Maybe not day and night for three months. But, for a couple of hours every once in a while.

What you experience will probably feel worse to you than it does to us. Because we are used to not seeing well and feel secure with our white canes. Only close your eyes or wear Sleep Shades when you have another sighted person next to you. Walking into traffic and falling off the curb isn't the experience you're trying to get.

Paula Freund helped with this story.

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I'M Nick Isenberg.

(Automated Voice- Talking Scale)

NICK: It's my talking scale reminding us that we'd like you to weigh in on how we're doing. Please let us know by sending a e-mail to thetactiletraveler@gmail.com

we spell traveler the American way with one quote L.” We’d also like to hear your story ideas from all over the world. Send us an e-mail with story ideas in the subject line at thetactiletraveller@g-mail.com .

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We would like to thank the following ORGANIZATIONS AND people who help make TODAY’S program possible.

Be My Eyes Microsoft Accessibilities Tech Support

Apple accessibility tech support

Patrick Conarro

Lorraine Hutchinson

Sarah Williams

Sophia Williams

Lucas Turner

And Raleigh Burly

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(UPBEAT WESTERN MUSIC TO CLOSE SHOW- FADE)

