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Disbled at every turn

Loretta Ann Soosayraj

"A SIMPLE meal outside can turn into a human rights issue for us," said Anthony Thanasayan. Born with spina bifida, a condition that causes the limbs to degenerate, Anthony has relied on a wheelchair for mobility since the age of 10.

"Discrimination," he said, "takes a lot of forms."

Disabled people face all kinds of limitations in living life, and most of them are not self-imposed. There are cases of people not allowed into bars because of facial disfiguration, for fear that the other patrons would be repulsed by them, and yet there are others in wheelchairs who are not allowed entrance because they don't fit the aisles. There was even a reported case of a boy who was not allowed to go on a class trip because he was diabetic.

In the West, there has been a marked increase in the number of discrimination lawsuits being filed by the disabled in recent years - something fighting for their rights, or of not even knowing what their rights are in the first place?

"I know of people who don't get jobs that they are qualified to do because they're disabled," Anthony said.

"The prospective employers would have had to spend money making the office disabled-friendly, which was just too much for them. My friend ended up not getting the job.

"Even if, as a disabled person, you are employed, there will always be certain areas in the office that your wheelchair cannot access, such as training programmes and camps. You will still lose out. The easiest thing for people to say is that they do not cater for the disabled," said Anthony.

But as no employer would ever openly admit to being influenced by a person's disability, those affected can only suspect that they are being discriminated against.

Anthony has been living with discrimination all his life.

"The first I encountered was the 'nice' kind. Because I walked with a severe limp, people stopped me from walking out of concern. My teachers would insist that I stay in during recess and would make my friends buy me food. Imagine being prevented from going to the canteen at break!

"There were also times when I was excused from doing homework. Once, a teacher even re-did my paper so that I came out tops. She thought she was helping me, but she really wasn't."

As he grew older, his brushes with discrimination took on a more ominous tone.

"People looking at me in a wheelchair assume that I am mentally disabled - no everywhere you want to. People look down at you. And when you are out there, with the rest of the walking public, you have to get out of their way. Always having to say 'excuse me' isn't exactly very pleasant," he said.

"It's as if it isn't YOUR world... as if you are a burden. How are we to hold our heads up high if we are made to feel like we don't even fit into society?"

As so many things that are already in place seem to work against the disabled and their attempts to lead normal lives, Anthony pioneered the concept of training service animals for the disabled in Malaysia with Bivai Special Dogs, of which Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir is patron.

Anthony has successfully trained his three dogs - Biman the Alsatian, Vai the Rottweiler and Soolam the Golden Retriever - to be his assistants, and is training other dogs for the same purpose.

The idea behind the programme is about making the disabled independent - yet even in doing this there are obstacles. Society here is simply unaccustomed to having a dog in an eatery, let alone on board a bus, whether the dog is a pet or service dog. In the West, on the other hand, service animals are used not just for wheelchair users but also for the blind, deaf and even those who get frequent epileptic seizures.

Anthony recalled one incident where his usually calm take on things was put to the test. When he arrived at a hotel for a meeting with several non-governmental organisations with Soolam, he was told by the front desk staff that he could not take the canine in. "Explaining why I needed Soo, I went in anyway despite their protests.

Illustrating an example of how Soo helps him: "I dropped a pen during the meeting and he picked it up for me. I couldn't get it myself, and I couldn't disturb anyone else.

"All went well, until the hotel management came and told me that I had to get rid of the dog. We argued and they eventually relented, and graciously allowed us to carry on."

While some establishments understand, most don't. But it isn't just the presence of Biman, Vai or Soolam that causes problems for Anthony.

On a grocery shopping excursion to a hypermarket, he was apprehended for suspected shoplifting because he had a large bag with him. "They didn't really ask me anything, I think they thought I couldn't even talk. They just took me away and searched my belongings. They obviously found nothing. Only then did I give them a piece of my mind ...but I was really scared."

Not every experience, however, leaves a bad taste in his mouth. There are many times that he feels reassured that people are learning to be more considerate.

For example, visits to some shopping malls, such as the MidValley Megamall where this interview took place, are pleasant because the management responds well to the need of the disabled.

Every time he needs to visit the mall, he just rings them up, and they make the arrangements to meet him at his car with the powershopper - a buggy for the disabled. Parking bays allotted for the disabled are ample and well positioned. But often, inconsiderate members of the public snatch these conveniently placed spots to save themselves a five-minute walk. There are also many places that do not even have specific parking allocations for the disabled.

"How dare they charge us for parking if they don't even have the facilities? It's daylight robbery," he said.

Only some cineplexes have the facilities.

"If they don't, they really have no business charging the disabled the full ticket price," says Anthony.

Public transportation, however, can turn nightmarish for the disabled who don't possess their own modes of transportation.

"Taxi drivers often don't stop when they see the wheelchair. If they do stop, they make excuses why they can't take me, like having a backache so they can't lift the chair. The ones who do take me charge an extra Rpm for putting the wheelchair in the boot, which is what they charge for luggage. How can they consider the chair luggage?"

Whether any of these obvious forms of discrimination calls for the perpetrators to be slammed with a lawsuit is unclear - what is clear is that Malaysians need to make good our claim that we live in a caring society.

* The writer can be contacted at loretta@nstp.mom.my