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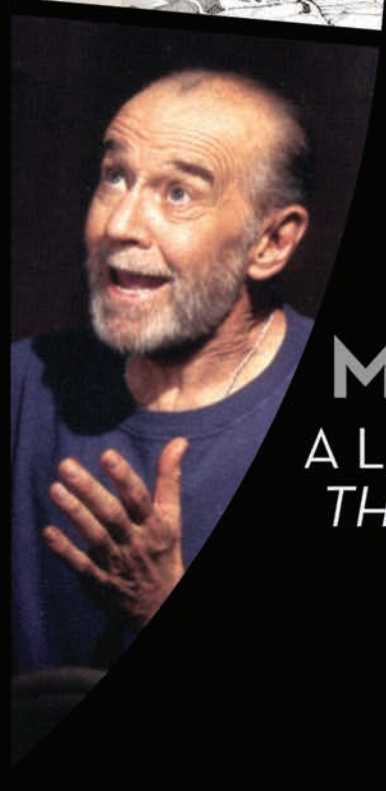
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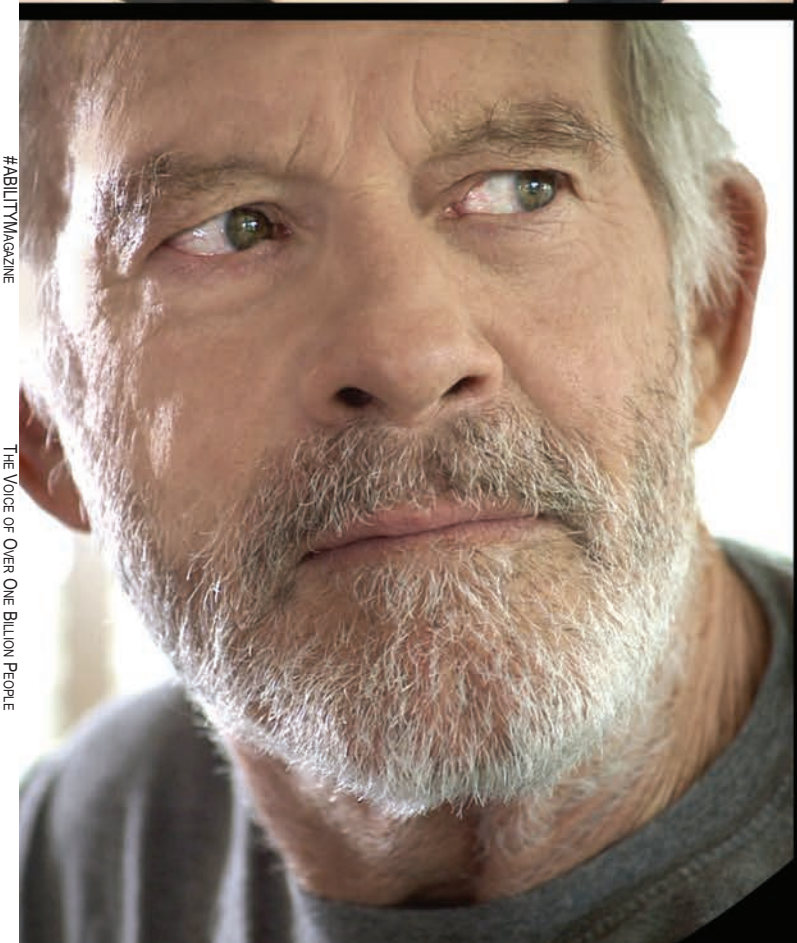
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- For High Contrast modes, under the "Setting" selection, press the button with four colored squares.
- To access the 58 Language Translator, press your phone's "Option" button, and select "Translate". To translate into another language, select the language button to the right, choose your language of preference, then hit the "Translate" button to the right of the selected language.





DRIVING LESSONS

Now that the weather is warming up, it's time to pack away the snowboard. I really wish I could do it year round like riding a dirt bike, but I guess I'll have to be satisfied with the few short months of the white stuff.

I've also been riding a lot more for fun now than ever, and find it a great stress reliever. I enjoyed racing professionally, and loved to win during that period of my life, but now it feels great to hit the tracks on my Husky, and not have to worry about winning. I just ride for the thrill of it!

In addition to signing up for acting and stunt jobs, I've also started to teach young girls how to ride motocross. I had been approached about this a lot, and had done it before, but someone always had to interpret for me, so I was a little nervous about trying it without an interpreter. When I tried to get one, it was not always possible to find a friend who could sign, and also knew moto terminology.

Recently, I trained this girl out at Zaca Station (near Santa Barbara, CA). As I took the long drive out there, I was nervous because I was going without an interpreter. I hoped communication wouldn't be too much of an issue, and that our mutual love of riding would be able to overcome everything!

I decided to bring a pit board with me, so that I would be able to draw some things out for her, and she could understand me better when we went out on the track. I talked and drew out some cornering skills, some different lines to take, and what we would be working on with the jumps. Everything went smoothly. It's a great feeling to be able to go out onto a track and share some of my skills with someone who wants to ride and is eager to learn. That was a wonderful day.

I'm including the flyer that I had made with some details of the training I do. If you're interested, email me.

Hope to see you on the track soon! ■ ABILITY



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THE BAD OLD DAYS

I always thought that other people got old, not me. The joint pain in my hands has made it difficult to turn back the clock. Father Time what's your deal? I've given you the best years of my life and this is how you repay me? I guess I first realized I was getting old that morning I looked in the mirror, then ran to grab my gun, believing there was some old creepy intruder in my house. Thank God I realized in time that the "intruder" was just me.

At some point in life you realize you're no Spring chicken anymore. As a matter of fact, the spring in your step has now turned into more of shuffle and, sadly, you've become a Fall hen. Case in point, you contemplate for a good five minutes about the best way on how to bend over to pick something up. You pay closer attention to drug commercials, like Lipitor and Lunesta. You gasp for breath from putting on your pants — the hardest part being the tugging of the waistband and the buttoning of said pants. It's like you're wrestling yourself as you crouch, stand on one leg, lay vertical on the bed, just trying to get that button through that little slit while your amorphous belly's mumbling, "This ain't happening. I'm telling you, it is not happening."

The tummy area is a real trouble spot as you get older. At some point, your tight ab muscles decide to retire and flab fills the role. The Ness sisters move in: pudginess, chubbiness, and plumpness. You're not sure whether to see a surgeon about liposuction, or a mechanic to remove the spare tire around your waist and put it on another vehicle. What you used to eat in a day you must now space out over a month. Diet books become required reading. A popular one is The 30–90; that's where for thirty days you can eat whatever you want then for ninety days you can't eat anything (Many do well at the beginning then lose willpower after thirty-one days then start all over again). You start to feel like just thinking about going to work-out is really just as good as working out. After all, it's the thought that counts.

The body makes sounds it never used to make. What is that clicking in the bones? Why do I groan every time I reach for something or push a computer key? Why do I have muscle aches from just lying on the couch? I guess watching TV really is bad for you. When you were younger, your bones and muscles would ache because you did something strenuous the day before, like yard work, rebuilding an engine, or jogging five miles. Now, muscles ache just for the hell of it. You wonder why your back hurts then it dawns on you — you decided to get out of bed in this morning.

What the hell are all these lines on my face? Did I sleep on my pillow wrong? It's frightening. Somehow your face has turned into an Atlas road map with more and more streets being added every year. Your crow's feet have turned into legs. You go from wrinkle creams, to Botox, to sandblasting. You've got the plastic surgeon on speed dial for any meltdown moments. Every frown and smile in life, you now regret. Why couldn't you have just remained stoned-face throughout your youth? "Yes, my brand new baby boy looks wonderful," you stoically say to the nurse. I think the face should be off limits to age. Why don't the feet get the wrinkles? You

can look at someone's face and guess-timate how old they are. Why can't we be like trees where the only way you know how old we are is to cut us in half and count the rings in our body? It's just not fair. You know things are starting to fall apart when you go to the airport and the ticket agent asks you if you'll be checking the bags under your eyes. You smile and say, "Have they, by chance, made the seats wider?"

As a man, you wonder where all your hair is going. It was hair today, but gone tomorrow. You realize it's not really gone, it's just now taken a different route… through your ears. This is why I doubt the evolution theory. What benefit to mankind is hairy ears, unless you live in Green Bay where it's always cold. With my tummy getting fatter and the balding, I'm beginning to think that maybe I eat my hair while I'm sleeping. Does hair have a lot of carbs? The hair you do have left, starts turning grey and it now becomes harder to lie about your age. "Oh this, I was painting the garage and a bucket of silver paint spilled on my head. I'm really only forty-one." The grey is like an infection. It invades your chest, beard, nose and the backs of Persians. Forget Ebola, where's the grey vaccine? They may make a movie about my head; "Fifty Shades of Grey."

It's not just the body, with old age the mind starts to diminish too. I have to make lists to remind myself what I need to do the next day. Things like do the dishes, fold clothes, feed the cat, etc. When the next day comes, I forget where I put my list so I spend the day making another list while the dishes remain piled in the sink, with a basket of clothes on the couch, and a meowing cat following me around the house while I mumble, "What did I come in this room to get?" My memory isn't what it used to be. Maybe it's true that beer really does kill brain cells. Either that, or they have migrated to the buttocks to spend some time with their cellulite cousins.

Maybe I don't want to remember things. Usually when you remember something it means work. I forgot the tomatoes at the store. I forgot to take out the trash. I forgot to pick the kids up from school. Once you remember, guess who has to go do this stuff? You and your wrinkly, flabby body, that's who. It's not that you're lazy, even though you are, but as we get older our energy levels decrease. You get tired just having to copy and paste something on the computer. Getting a glass of water becomes a chore. You sit on the couch plotting the easiest route to the refrigerator. Could you imagine if it was like the olden days where we had to actually get up and change the TV channel? I cringe at the thought. That remote control inventor guy should've gotten a Nobel Peace Prize.

I don't know when it happened, but I stopped seeing things I used to see. Little things like chairs, stop signs, and cars coming at me. My world became blurry. It's like all of a sudden my eyes said, "Alright, we've seen enough in our life time. That's it." There's nothing worse than sitting in a crowded restaurant waving across the room to someone you recognize only to realize, after squinting, that it's not who you thought it was. The perplexed individual looks at you like a drunk buffoon as your spasmodic waving hand slowly drops on your head while you pretend to fix your hair. You finally go to the eye doctor and he tells you to read the big lettered chart. You're like, "Great. And the chart would be...?" "Right in front of you," he responds. You know you've gotten old when you have to slip on those little reader glasses to see your dinner bill that you keep pushing and pulling towards your eyes to find the optimal distance to read it. And you're really old when you start griping about how much the apple pie cost.

Perhaps the worst thing about getting older is that you become grumpier. Nobody around you can do anything right. People annoy you more than ever. Staying home and reading a book trumps going out to a dinner party and making idle chit-chat about how the kids are doing. You're just tired of saying, "They're all idiots. None of them can doing anything right." You stay in while your back goes out. Somewhere along the time line, you started walking around the house turning off lights and mumbling, "Who the hell keeps turning on these lights?" forgetting it was you who was in the room last. Whenever you watch the news you wonder what the hell this country is coming to. The grumpier you become is where you find your happiness. But age is like fine wine, after being left out so many years you get soured.

There is no such thing as aging gracefully. It's a curse that we all must endure. They say age is just a number; if that's the case, then I choose 21. Of course my body vehemently disagrees, but I can dream. I just can't dunk a basketball. Once in a while you try and relive the old days by doing something stupid like lifting a heavy box of Styrofoam peanuts only to wind up in hospital with a pulled groin. The morphine helps you to realize that your mind made a promise that your body couldn't keep.

There's an old Chinese proverb that says, "When things are inevitable, just enjoy it." It seems like good advice to follow, even though I'm not Chinese. There is no doubt that life will take its toll on all of us, as evident by the wrinkles, the greys, and the aches. It's hard to say how much we've really aged; when you get old, you're just like the baby you once were: you can't walk, you drool, and you have to wear diapers. How we handle change is what's important. The good thing is that you're never too old to laugh or smile, or even enjoy the smallest of things. No matter what you look like, you will always be you… and sometimes that's a good thing. My advice is to just embrace getting older… and throw out every mirror and scale in the house. ■ ABILITY



by Jeff Charlebois



JUROR NUMBER 999

Recently I attended Wild Honey Orchestra's tribute to the Beatles' *White Album*. It was a wonderful concert and my amazing & talented friend Nick Guzman (who has autism) did a duet with Susan Cowsill! But that particular record wasn't one of my favorite by the Beatles. And song No. 9 on that album was just weird; I couldn't wrap my brain around it. But it does trigger a memory of when I was chosen for jury duty in 1993. An odd correlation, I know, but as I explain my one and only jury experience, you may come to understand why my thoughts traveled back to that July more than two decades ago.

Let me set the scene: I had just moved to Las Vegas, NV, in March, and by summer I had been summoned for jury duty. For years, I had been able to get out of jury duty because of my cerebral palsy and profound hearing loss. The court system never challenged my medical excuse, which was great because I really didn't want to serve. It wasn't because I don't believe in the justice system, or that I'm not a loyal American citizen. But I was terrified of hearing something incorrectly and jeopardizing someone's right to a fair trial. Emotionally it was just too difficult for me to take that risk.

As it was, I called the courthouse and said that I could not serve because I had CP, and that I did not yet have a doctor's note because I had just moved to town. I was then asked how CP prevented me from intellectually comprehending information. Does it affect you cognitively? I said, "No, but I am hearing impaired as well."

They told me, "Well, we are in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and can accommodate you," At that point, I was in sheer panic mode! For years, CP and hearing loss had been considered a valid reason for me not to be on a jury, but with the passing of the ADA I was suddenly expected to serve. I asked her how the court planned to accommodate me. She told me that they would have a sign-language interpreter. I told her that I had never learned sign language.

Then, out of complete fear and lack of all understanding of how the jury system worked, I stupidly added that I couldn't serve because I was a television actress, a comedian, a celebrity. This statement caused the woman on the line to pause. After an awkward silence, she asked me how being a celebrity prevented me from serving on a jury. "Well, what if the defendant gets convicted of a crime, and they recognize me from *Facts of Life*, and then targets me later?"

She calmly told me that I was no longer Juror No. 23, but Juror No. 999. I was afraid to ask her what exactly that meant. She also said that I was to show up at the courthouse on Monday and tell the judge everything that I had told her.

On Monday, Jurors No. 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, and me, No. 999, entered the courtroom. Not only was I recognized from *Facts of Life*, but everyone laughed! I was in the very back of the room, and could not hear any of the proceedings (my original fear confirmed). So I raised my hand, as I had in high school civics class. The judge acknowledged me: "Just state your jury number and your issue." I said I was Juror No. 999, everyone laughed again, and responding as a comedian, I said, "Well at least I am not Juror No. 666!" The judge pounded her gavel to silence the laughter; clearly she was not happy.

She asked the bailiff to bring me closer so that I could



hear. He put me in a chair *right next to the defendant*! I was close enough to touch him! He looked at me, and out of nervousness, I smiled. He rolled his eyes.

After the preliminary proceedings, I ended up being chosen as one of the 12 jurors! I was scared out of my mind. When the judge asked us one more time if there was a reason we couldn't serve, I raised my hand again.

The judge said, "Yes Juror 999, what is it now?"

I said, "Well, I'm flying to Colorado tomorrow. What if I don't make it back in time for the trial?"

She said, "When is your returning flight?"

"Sunday night."

"So how does that interfere with the trial on Monday?"

"There could be weather problems."

"In July? On a flight between Vegas from Denver? What weather problems do you foresee, Juror 999?"

"Clouds?" I said.

At that point I was told that if I didn't show up Monday morning, I would be declared in contempt of court.

On Monday the trial began, and the judge informed the court that because Juror 999 was hearing impaired and did not know sign language, that counsels were expected to repeat every question to me personally so that I could read their lips. The ADA was brand new, and the court was trying to abide by it.

My saving grace that Monday morning was a fire drill at 11 a.m. We didn't get back in the courtroom until 3:30 p.m., by which time the defendant and his counsel announced that instead of proceeding with a trial, they would take a plea bargain. We jurors were all released.

I still believe that some people are not capable of serving on a jury. For me, at the time it was because of my hearing loss. Sometimes I hear "WAWWAWA AND WAWAAWAWA." I wouldn't want someone like me on my jury, and I don't feel confident that I would be fair to all parties concerned for me to serve, period!

To this day, I still don't know what Juror No. 999 means. I even tried to Google it, but found nada. However intuitively I think it means that I was willing to make up anything and go to any extreme to get out of jury duty.

In actuality, I did not lie. It's just that my valid reason was not accepted. So *you* be the judge. ■ ABILITY

gerijewell.com



by Geri Jewell

Grass Roots

CHINESE POET XIUHUA YU



Some critics believe that in the past there were few grassroots poets, or poets without a formal education. But recently a group of them has emerged, representing farmers and coal miners. Their poems are candid and powerful. People love their poetry because it reflects their own reality. Poet Xiuhua Yu is not an isolated case. As poets, they really should be recognized as a new genre and as a phenomenon.

Xiuhua Yu has caught people's attention since last September when her poetry was published in the prestigious national magazine *Poetry*. When her poetry was introduced through her blog, the number of "likes" came like ocean waves. Her most recent popular poem is "Over Half of China Sleeps with You." People are increasingly curious about this female peasant who feeds rabbits. Some reporters even traveled over half of China to see her. She walked wobbly and had a hard time speaking to the reporters.

Xiuhua Yu was born in 1976 at Hengshang village in China's Hubei Province. Born feet first, she suffered from cerebral hypoxia. Later on she developed cerebral palsy. Since her parents had to work in the field all day long, her grandmother raised her and her younger brother.

Due to her cerebral palsy, Xiuhua wasn't able to walk until age four. Then her father made a special walking tool for her. It was made with a wooden stick and wheels. When she needed to walk, she always had the walking tool with her. During her early elementary years, her father would carry her to and from school. Later on, her school teacher would hold her hand and walk her home.

She was a good student who studied very hard. Due to her physical condition, her right hand was not able to hold a pencil. Although her left hand could hold one, she wrote slowly. This affected her tests and grades since she didn't have enough time to finish the exams. Her hands and feet were too weak to play with classmates. All she could do was watch them play games.

In July 1995 she dropped out of the high school before taking her college entrance exams. Even though she was good at language arts, she lagged behind in math. After she realized that her physical condition prevented her from taking her college exams, she burned all her text books in front of the school.

The best memory of her school years made her happy for a long time. "What a sweet little girl!" she remembered a teacher saying who praised her poetry after she read aloud a poem from her diary.

She was all by herself for a while. Many classmates went off to college while others went to work in the cities. When she was19 years old, she was introduced to a man by her father whom she later married. "Marriage was fresh at the beginning," she said, "but later on I was bored."

Playing mahjong with villagers was the main entertainment, but she just really loved reading. She has read Jorge Luis Borges works, Alai's *The Dust Settles*, and Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*.

Her first published piece of poetry was in the magazine *September*. Then her poetry was read on the Jingmen local news. The editor of a newspaper recognized her poems and considered them remarkable.

After her poems were published last year in *Poetry*, which is considered China's top magazine, she was invited to recite her poetry at the People's University of China last December. The event was held exclusively for the grassroots poets, and she shared the stage with three other poets. When she began to recite her poetry, her mother began to cry. Although she couldn't understand her daughter's poetry, she was nonetheless proud of her.

On December 22, 2014, the *People's Daily Newspaper* published a story about Xiuhua Yu in the cultural section. Then, in the local government office, she became a celebrity. In Hengshang Village, people didn't know what she wrote about, but her poems were published. She is now a big celebrity.

Legend in the village says, if she were not disabled, she would have her good fortune somewhere else. The villagers believe that her intelligence is genetic because her brother is a high school teacher and her son is a university student.

Xiuhua Yu admires people who leave their villages to find work. In 2012, for the first time in her life, she left her own village to work. She found a job through the Internet working for a disabilities employment services company in Wenzhou. The company would cover for room and board, and she would get paid for doing manual work with leather.

So she bought a bus ticket and went to Wenzhou. But her father called her back home before she had a chance to get paid. She said she didn't like the people there, but her father said she was sick and had a quarrel with her boss. The outside world is harsher than she thought.

She was easily irritated by her short temper. It was known in the village, but everyone did not care due to her disabled condition. She admitted that she had a short temper. Her parents tried to help her by opening a grocery store, but she would not talk to customers. Then the store closed.

Once there was a friend, whom she met online, and who came to the village. The friend turned around after seeing her from a distance. Xiuhua Yu often uses rude language to protect herself.

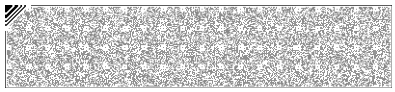
In January, her phone was ringing constantly, so she wrote on Weixing, a cell phone application similar to Facebook, "I wish people read my poems instead of calling me. I just want to try my best to write my poems peacefully. It will not last too long as the wind will blow away soon."

Some scholars consider her China's Emily Dickinson or the French countryside poet Yamu, but Xiuhua Yu told reporters she had never read their poems. "Poetry is the natural expression of the soul." This is Xiuhua Yu's understanding of poetry.

Her poems express a profound life experience of living with pain. People find her poetry candid, passionate, fresh and pure; there is no sense of artificiality. Her unfulfilled feeling in disabiltiy, marriage, and her deep love for her family has been transformed into her poems.

"I don't want to be treated like this," Xiuhua Yu told reporters. In January, she wrote a poem in front of reporters called "If You are Silent, the Sea will Stop the Noise." Xiuhua Yu said, "I'm just a peasant woman and really grateful to poetry. This is my bonus that my poetry has led people to open their arms and hug me." She hopes people will treat her as Xiuhua Yu, rather than someone with cerebral palsy or a farmer.

"Poetry is what really makes us live in peace," said the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. One fan wrote on her blog, "I just want you to always be yourself." People ask her what her dream is. "All the praise becomes like spring; I just want to live well and to write good poetry," says Xiuhua Yu. ■





Dubious Identity

I can not confess in court
Snow in my left pocket and fire in my right
Fire would burn the prairie, the city, and the fish
Snow would cover the road and the crime
I have the moonlight, but I am in the dark
I have a peach tree, but I don't see it bloom
I have the endless spring, but I feel winter
I have stolen the chemical plant, the office building, and the museum
But, I have nothing and I am penniless
I am a sinner
Let me run away
I am my own judge
Ban my spirit
I'll run away in the dark night from this town
Without a trace

A Bag of Wheat

The second time, he can't carry the bag of wheat by himself
It slipped down
He cursed and said
He could do it last year
The third time, I help him put the bag on his shoulder
I said to him: you have no white hair
You can do it
But I know he will never have white hair
He has a disabled daughter and a teenager grandson
He is too busy to even grow his hair white

You Don't See What I cover

In spring, I hold up flowers, fire, the tree crowns on the cliff
Yet the lonely voice of the rain
Pound the sunset sky
So hurried and no time for love
I bite your name until I bleed
Still I can't break the dark seal
These small things make me pause: cannas, black butterfly, and water reflections
I speak to them and bow my head
Hello! How are you? Please accept my affection!
Still, I have never been confused
Just like a river, days and nights constantly running
But in the end I can't forgive myself
I keep you in my heart, complete
You are better not knowing
All my imagination
How much the dust can conceal the pure love
From a lady like me

I Love You

Such a pity to live daily
Fetching water, cooking, and taking medicine
Place me into a sunny day
Just like dried orange peel
All kinds of tea to drink
Chrysanthemum, jasmine, rose and lemon
These wonderful things take me to the road of spring
So I want to cease the snowing in my heart
It is too white to relate to spring
Reading your poems in the clean yard
Such a lovely moment
Dreaming like those sparrows passing by suddenly
Time is so bright and wonderful
I should not be so sad
My liver and intestines are becoming pieces, inch by inch
If I send you a book
It is not about poems
It is about plants and crops
Telling you the difference between rice and tares
Telling you about a frighten spring from one tare

My Dog, Xiaowu

I limp out of the yard and he follows
We walk by the vegetable patch,
Over the ridge to the north
To grandmother's home
I fall into a ditch and he wags his tail
I reach out to my dog and he licks the blood from my fingers
The man is drunk and he says that he has a lover in Beijing
She is better looking than me
They go out to dancing if he has no work
He loves dancing women
Loves to watch the women sway their hips
The man says, those women moaning in bed, sound nice
Not like me, no sound, and always coving my face
I am silent when I have my meal and call out
"Xiaowu, xiaowu," I toss him some meat
My dog happily barks and wags his tail
The man pulls my hair and pushes me against the wall
Xiaowu wags his tail constantly
I am not afraid of the pain, so he is powerless
We walk to grandmother's home
Then I remember, she has been dead for many years ■ ABILITY

chinadp.net.cn

This story is part of a series of articles published as an exclusive editorial exchange between *China Press for People with Disabilities* & *Spring Breeze* and *ABILITY Magazine.*

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For a few days in March, amidst the bright sun and the sea breeze, San Diego hosted the 30th International Technology & Persons with Disabilities Conference, organized by California State University, Northridge, commonly referred to as CSUN 2015. The yearly conference highlights innovations that help enable people around the world.

I was honored to help out at the *ABILITY Magazine* booth this year, and had a blast getting to know the enthusiastic attendees and neighboring exhibitors, especially those who provided free samples of Australian Chocolate. Aside from sharing past issues and showcasing a display of the many famous faces that have appeared on the cover, I spent my time gathering beta testers for an exciting new app I helped develop with ASCI, Inc. for *ABILITY Magazine*.

Access Check is a streamlined iOS app that allows people to report accessibility obstacles. The reports are collected on an interactive map database. Reports can also be shared on social media platforms, and emailed to responsible parties, to help get problems fixed.

The conference was an opportunity for us to get feedback on the app from people who experience the frustration of inaccessibility firsthand. Pushing my little sister's wheelchair around for sixteen years, my family has expertise in avoiding cracked sidewalks, rampless restaurants, and impossibly heavy doors, but this should not have to be the case. At the conference, I encountered many willing testers, and am proud to see more and more pins appearing on the Access Check map.

As I got to know new people, I was interested in learning how the app works for people with visual difficulties using the VoiceOver iOS feature. I tried navigating my own phone using VoiceOver, and thought I did a decent job until I met a lovely blind woman who asked me for some help finding her friend Stan. The internet was too weak for her map to load. She zipped through her iPhone so fast that my eyes could not keep up. After a thorough search of the Hyatt we did find Stan, and his adorable dog.

I met more amazing people at the CSUN 2015 Google Sky Lounge Party, where they served freshly made liquid nitrogen ice-cream under the stars. At the party, a person with low vision offered to test out Access Check. He turned on the iPhone's blackout feature to prevent us from seeing the screen and helping him navigate it, which was a true test of functionality. He gave us some tips on improving our location verification page, to make it easier for VoiceOver to describe. We adopted his suggestion, and are excited to incorporate feedback from everyone. We want to build a great tool that works intuitively for everyone, and we need a broad range of perspectives.

All in all CSUN was a wonderful experience this year. I am thankful to *ABILITY Magazine* for helping us spread the word. It was so exciting to hear from great thinkers and see how robots, devices, programs and 3-D printers (my favorite) are making the world more inclusive, one invention at a time. ■ ABILITY

by Ana Marva Fernández



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Dyslexia
LEARNING DIFFERENTLY

Photos by Daniela Alarcón Sánchez

Luz visiting schools to see the app Piruletras, in action

Ever since the late Steve Jobs mentioned he was dyslexic some years back, this developmental reading disorder has acquired a certain caché. As if having dyslexia made you a genius. Nowadays, it seems that one in every four entrepreneurs claims they grew up dyslexic.

Hold on, please. Dyslexia is serious. Rates of school failure are around 15 percent in the European Union and 25 percent in Spain, where I was born. In the US, high school students drop out at a rate of about 6 percent to 7 percent a year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Sometimes it is not the child's fault. Maybe the kids are doing their all, but nobody notices that they're struggling and on the verge of giving up.

Around 10 percent of the population around the world has dyslexia. One of the earliest ways to detect it is to pay attention to poor school performance. I don't know exactly how many children drop out owing to dyslexia, but I do know that I want to help with research and applications to decrease that rate.

CAPABLE, BUT UNDER PERFORMING

Having dyslexia as a child is to feel that you're capable of performing at the same level as other kids, and yet not understanding why you're having difficulty. You don't get why people are telling you that you're doing it all wrong, even though you're working hard. You believe that the way that you read and write is fine. But your perceptions are clouded by your experience, which only makes sense to you. You need people to show you a better way. In my, case it was a teacher.

Dyslexia has a neurological basis that is unrelated to intelligence. It's also not related to work capacity or imagination. Still, even if science says so, it's difficult to stop believing that you were not born with a defect.

For instance, some time ago my boyfriend asked me to marry him. Then, recently, I was awakened by a nightmare in which there was a law that did not allow someone with dyslexia to marry someone without it.

My challenges with dyslexia go way back: I remember having my table against the blackboard at school while the rest of the children were seated behind me. They all thought that I could not succeed, that I was not intelligent enough. I remember inventing games in the corridor because the teacher used to throw me out me of class. I knew by heart the number of tiles in the corridors of my school. I even invented a song that helped me count them, which is what I was doing while the other students sat in class learning.

It's not fair to go though a daily nightmare when you're trying your best and working as hard as you can. My



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story has a happier ending, compared to most: I went on to earn a PhD. But what about all the children who don't come out of this situation successfully? What about all the forgotten children who drop out and believe they're stupid and incapable of learning because they have dyslexia? What about all the talent that goes wasted in the world?

I believe dyslexia can be overcome and technology can help. This belief helped me move up the educational ladder, finally arriving at a PhD program at Spain's Universitat Pompeu Fabra, where I studied how to support people with dyslexia using human-computer interaction, natural-language processing and linguistics.

ONE FILTER: WRITTEN LANGUAGE

When children are coming up, there is typically only one filter: Written language. Reading and writing form a funnel in our educational system. If you have to learn something, you have to read it. To show that you know something, you have to write it. There is no way out. Dyslexics try to adapt to this funnel approach, but what if we were to change the text itself, instead of fighting to change the brain of the person with dyslexia?

And that's what we did. In several experiments using the eye-tracking techniques of 150 people with dyslexia, we found that the text presentation and text-content parameters can make a person read significantly faster without losing comprehension. These ideas are already integrated in applications for Android and Web with more than 35,000 downloads, such as the IDEAL eBook Reader.

Given that we dyslexics are not aware of the mistakes we make when we write, we thought: What if we learned how to write from our mistakes? So we designed a new exercise method based on linguistic analysis of dyslexics' errors. This new method is integrated into a game, Piruletras (Dyseggxia). We tested it in a school with 48 dyslexic children, and after four weeks of using the app, children significantly improved their spelling. The app's been downloaded over 20,000 times in more than 70 countries.

With the game, we organizad the first contest for children with dyslexia in Barcelona. In teams, they helped each other sovle language problems, sharing their own learning strategies. While schools typically isolate students who have dislexia, in this situation they meet new friends while working to overcome the learning disorder. These are some of their happiest days.

This is what we have accomplished so far, but it's neither sufficient nor sustainable. We cannot respond to the flood of email from parents and teachers asking for information and technical support. The same with all the necessary software updates. But we continue to seek lasting solutions.

WORKING TOWARDS A SOLUTION

These days, I'm a postdoctoral fellow at Carnegie Mellon University, where we're researching two main challenges: How to detect dyslexia using human/computer interaction indicators—a crucial problem because children with dyslexia are too often diagnosed after they are already failing. Second, we want to develop a spell checker for people with dyslexia, because current ones do not detect a good percentage of the errors written by people with dyslexia. But even if our research is successful, the next step must be to empower people with knowledge and technology, so that every individual with dyslexia gets the support they need.

I would like to create a "do it yourself" package made up of knowledge and tools. Each person who would like to reduce school failure owing to dyslexia can go to that package and get what they need. Parents could use the tools to help their children. Teachers could take the knowledge and tools to detect dyslexia and assist students. They would be the heroes, as the teacher who helped me was my hero. Teachers could take the guidelines to replicate and adapt the methods to other languages.

Recently, two German researchers adapted the Piruletras (Dyseggxia) method. We're creating the foundation, Change Dyslexia, to support even wider spread adoption of the method. The largest network of social entrepreneurs worldwide, Ashoka, is now supporting this foundation. My wish is that Change Dyslexia will be a social enterprise serving a movement that includes those who want to complete their education after encountering failure caused by dyslexia.

Can you imagine a school that is proud of having all its children with dyslexia detected and given the needed resources to learn, grow and thrive? Maybe then school will become a place where they get what they need to graduate and live happily. ■ ABILITY

by Luz Rello

Luz Rello's PhD thesis, DysWebxia: A Text Accessibility Model for People with Dyslexia was published in 2014 by the Department of Information and Communication Technologies at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Spain. In this article, she also referenced two other works: IDEAL: a Dyslexic-Friendly eBook Reader, a paper that she co-wrote with Guarang Kanvinde and Ricardo Baeza-Yates; and A Computer-Based Method to Improve the Spelling of Children with Dyslexia, which she co-authored with Clara Bayarri, Yolanda Otal de la Torri and Martin Pielot.



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ARMENIA

a model for change



Until it became independent in 1991, Armenia was one of the 15 republics that made up the Soviet Union. The country is rich in culture deeply rooted in its ancestry—what it lacks in population, the people surpass in determination.

Armen Der Kiureghian, PhD, has been dividing his time between UC Berkeley and the American University of Armenia (AUA). Merely a few years after Armenia's devastating 1988 earthquake, he helped establish AUA, which is an affiliate of the University of California—though the two campuses are more than 7,000 miles away from one another.

With the sweet aroma of pastries, colorfully delicious fruits and traditional Armenian coffee, Chet Cooper and Lia Martirosyan of *ABILITY Magazine* shared a lovely brunch with President of AUA, Dr. Armen Der Kiureghian—at Lia's Southern California home.

Lia Martirosyan: American University of Armenia had a unique beginning.

Der Kiureghian: Yes, it was the 1988 earthquake in Armenia. I'm a structural engineer who looks at the effect of earthquakes on big buildings, bridges, and so on. Right after the earthquake, the US National Academy of Science formed a team during the thawing of relations between the US and the Soviet Union. Soviet President Gorbachev was actually in Washington when the earthquake happened. There was an outpouring of sympathy and willingness to help.

The academy formed a team to go to Armenia and look at the effects of the earthquake, and any lessons that could be learned. I was on the 22-member team of scientists, seismologists and engineers who went over. During a second visit a couple of months later, two things happened: First, I was disappointed at how the non-Armenian Soviet specialists were dealing with the earthquake. They weren't trying to identify problems and find solutions. And then, during a gathering, the idea of setting up an American university came up. I thought it would be a good thing. A colleague and I, who were on the original team that went to Armenia, got things started.

Martirosyan: It was as simple as that?

Der Kiureghian: We proposed this university, and it caught on. It's one of those things where the planets line up once in a million years. AUA was established in collaboration with the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), which put up the money; the Armenian Minister of Higher Education, which provided the building; and the University of California. We're very closely affiliated with the University of California. (The UC public university system has 10 campuses throughout the state.) AUA started in '91 with only graduate programs, because the country needed to prepare specialists very quickly. We have eight master's programs: industrial engineering; systems management; computer sciences; public health; law; political science; international affairs; and teaching English as a foreign language. Two years ago we started an undergraduate program. We're adding each year.

We're accredited by a commission recognized by the US Department of Education; the same one that accredits Cal Berkeley, Stanford, UCLA and other universities on the west coast. Last year our accreditation was up for renewal. Usually they give it for seven or eight years. We got it for nine. I'm very happy about that.

Martirosyan: Congratulations!

Der Kiureghian: We're also excited because we signed an agreement of collaboration with UCLA to exchange faculty and students, and conduct joint projects. We're offering some AUA-UCLA courses in this summer's intensive program. There are also two faculty members from UCLA who'll teach at AUA. One is a UCLA lecturer, who has a PhD in Armenian studies. Her father, from age 45, was disabled. As a young woman, she would carry him to the balcony of their home in Armenia, so he could see outside for a while. The concept of a wheelchair didn't exist then. And Gregory Areshian, who's also from Armenia originally, is an adjunct associate professor at UCLA in Archaeology. He's the one who discovered the 6,000-year-old shoe in an Armenian cave.

Cooper: Just the one shoe? There's always one shoe missing.

(laughter)

Der Kiureghian: But there's more to it. I went to the cave with him last October, and he discovered—

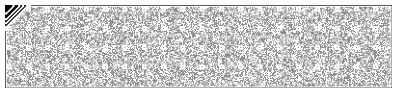
Cooper: —a sock?

Der Kiureghian: *(laughs)* It's a bit gory, but there was half of a young woman's body that was 6,000 years old. At the time, sacrificing half of a body apparently had some significance in mythology.

Cooper: He discovered that?

Der Kiureghian: Yes, he's a very accomplished archeologist. So if you put "6,000-year-old shoe" in a search engine, you'll find lots of articles. It was a big discovery. UCLA got a lot of mileage from that. And not only that, but in the same cave, people made wine. There are wine barrels, so it's the oldest winery. They found some grains that were 6,000 years old—residue on the wine barrels in Areni, where the wine region is. They plan to clone them.

Cooper: You should promote that in your tourism ads.





Representatives from the Ministry of Emergency Situations of RA demonstrate roof evacuation and how to extinguish a fire during a disaster preparedness drill at AUA

Wasn't there something about the Ark as well?

Der Kiureghian: Noah's Ark? Of course, Mount Ararat, every morning you get up, it's there.

Cooper: You've been up there, too?

Martirosyan: You can't access Ararat from Armenia these days.

Der Kiureghian: The mountain is so huge; it's as if it's the background for the city.

Martirosyan: That's true. It does look that way. You know, I wanted to know more about how you got appointed president.

Der Kiureghian: I was dean of engineering for 16 years at Berkeley. I would go back and forth between UC Berkeley and AUA, and also work by email and fax. I've been a member of the board of trustees from the beginning. So when the past president declared late last year that he was going to resign this summer, the board asked me to go for a year while they decided on the next president, so I took a leave of absence from Berkeley and went there in July. And then in January the board asked me to continue as permanent president. I've agreed. So that's why I'm retiring from Berkeley, where I've been for the past 24 years. As of July, I'll be an emeritus Berkeley professor and president of AUA.

Cooper: Tell me about AUA's campus.

Der Kiureghian: We started with one building, which ironically was once used by the Communist Party. They gave it to us in 1991. It was huge and at first we were like, "Wow, how are we going to fill this?" But pretty soon we ran out of capacity. Since the building is from the Soviet-era, we've significantly modified it. We built two connecting buildings behind it, and received a lot of support from American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (ASHA). That's a USAID agency that contributes not only to universities in other countries—including American University of Beirut, American University of Paris, American University of Cairo and 15 others—but also to American hospitals abroad.

At AUA, we've used some of the support we've gotten from ASHA and other donors to make the old Communist propaganda hall accessible. During the Soviet era, you had to climb up a few stairs to get into the building. But all we had to do was add a ramp. We created special parking. There are now ramps to the library. Before you couldn't go if you were in a wheelchair.

Cooper: How many of Armenia's universities are accessible?

Der Kiureghian: The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), an NGO in Armenia, did a survey of the country's 29 universities, and found that only AUA was accessible to students in wheelchairs. Our aim is to go beyond educating students, to provide an alternative model in Armenia for universities operating in Soviet-era buildings.

OSCE funds projects in former Soviet republics, which were notorious for not considering those with disabilities. Although in the capital, Yerevan, there's a school for deaf people from Soviet times. The OSCE report recommends



Volunteers from Unison NGO, came out to showcase the university's accessibility & services during the drill

that the Minister of Higher Education provide the resources so universities can become more accessible; the government is getting more pressure to put resources behind the upgrades.

Cooper: What about evacuation for people in wheelchairs, or any disability—in case of an emergency.

Der Kiureghian: There was just a drill to simulate how people are going to evacuate from university buildings in an emergency. Someone from an NGO that deals with people with disabilities was contacted by our people and asked if they would like to participate. I think four wheelchair users were to see whether they could get out.

Martirosyan: That's great.

Cooper: The Federal Emergency Management Agency is doing the same thing: Trying to better evaluate disaster preparedness for people with disabilities in general, because they could have a mobility issue, and/or they could be blind or deaf.

Der Kiureghian: One problem we have right now with the main building is there are many doors. You have to open one door and enter, and then there's another small area that you have to enter. So maneuvering can be difficult. But we are going to change this. We have an ASHA grant to add sliding doors.

Martirosyan: That's good. Hopefully you're looking at the elevators, too... are you aware of The Ed Roberts Campus in Berkeley? Roberts spend a time of his life in an iron lung; he pressed Berkeley to become more accessible. Outside of the elevator, a couple of big buttons are on the bottom, so if you're using a wheelchair, you can wheel up and push it with the chair. Their stairway is a huge ramp; it's a slow incline to the second floor. Creative thought has gone into the design of the center.

Der Kiureghian: We've had some students who've been disabled, navigated through, and finished. We had a legally blind student who graduated from our Teaching of English as a Foreign Language program. She is now teaching and doing translation for a government agency. We have very strict non-discriminatory laws, just like here, in admissions, in employment, in all aspects. On religious, sexual orientation, disability, mental condition, gender.

Martirosyan: I'm so glad to hear that.

Cooper: In terms of AUA's innovations, are you using newer, web-based technology?

Der Kiureghian: Yes, we provide a model for change not only in terms of our students, but also in terms of our process. We're developing an in-house university management system. It eliminates the possibility for corruption with admissions, registration, grades, and transcripts. Sometimes we collaborate with other universities in these matters. For example, recently some administration from other schools came to our university to hear about our admissions process.

Martirosyan: You have a no-smoking campus policy.

Der Kiureghian: Young people smoke way too much. So when we started AUA in 1981, we declared the school non-smoking from day one. Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, a chain smoker, came to our grand opening and was shocked.

(*laughter*)

He would use his first cigarette to light his second. So when he walked into the new building and saw the sign, he said, "You mean I can't smoke?" And my colleague said, "You can't. It's our law." So for the one hour that he was in the building, he didn't smoke. I think that's the longest period in his life—while he was not sleeping anyway—that he didn't smoke. We haven't thrown anyone out for smoking, but students who get caught are given a warning.

Cooper: If you need a bouncer, Lia can come out and toss them.

Martirosyan: I can take care of it!

Der Kiureghian: (*laughs*) Usually when we catch them once, they stop. But we were the first non-smoking building in the country. Now it has spread to some hospitals and public places.



AUA's President
Dr. Armen Der Kiureghian

Cooper: Talk show host Jon Oliver brought attention to this issue by showing how tobacco companies are suing some countries to stop them from changing their cigarette packaging. For example, in Australia, they put disturbing images of people who have cancer on the packages to show what smoking eventually does to you. And then the tobacco company sued Australia. But Australia won, and the tobacco company had to pay its legal fees, which were in the millions.

Even though they lost, tobacco companies still tell other countries: "Look what we did to Australia," and some of the smaller countries get intimidated. So one of the things you could possibly push within Armenia is to address cigarette packaging. There are some stats that say there's something like a 40-percent drop in smoking when the packaging reflects a negative image of smoking.

Der Kiureghian: Yes, and on a personal level, I go to a restaurant or jazz club, and come out as if I've smoked a couple of cigarettes myself. Right now restaurants and other public places don't even have non-smoking sections. Smokers essentially govern the situation. I think giving people the right information to motivate them is important, but also it's important to put pressure on lawmakers to make public buildings provide relief to non-smokers. That's not happening.

Cooper: There's enough information out there on how the US and other countries have pushed with pure numbers by showing the economic benefits not only to the economy, because of decreased health costs, but also to the health of the individual.

Der Kiureghian: Yes. Going back to what we were saying about people with disabilities in Armenia, things have improved in many ways. There are some companies that are progressive in their thinking, including the cell-phone company, Vivasel, do you know them?

Martirosyan: Yes. Similar to Verizon.

Der Kiureghian: They have many employees who use wheelchairs, and their office is designed in a way that employees can maneuver. Similar things are happening all over Armenia.

Martirosyan: That's great. The last time I was there, about two years ago, I did not see one person out and about in a wheelchair, using crutches, a walker, or anything of that nature.

Der Kiureghian: You're right. You don't see people in chairs in the streets very much.

Martirosyan: Steps and cobblestones.

Der Kiureghian: This particular office that I'm talking about had been retrofitted to make it accessible. I saw maybe five or six employees in that office.

There's also an ensemble of artists, musicians and singers with disabilities that sing at AUA every year at graduation. I've also seen them perform in the garden of Parliament.

Cooper: Do you know of any Armenian artists who sing opera and happen to have a disability?

Der Kiureghian: I don't.

Cooper: You actually do.

*Martirosyan: (*laughs*)*

Der Kiureghian: Oh, really! Lia sings opera?

Martirosyan: Classical music, arias from operas.

Der Kiureghian: Really! (*laughs*) Now I do know someone! Fantastic. Soprano?

Martirosyan: Lyric soprano.

Der Kiureghian: Do you sing in Armenian?

Martirosyan: Yes, English, Italian, Armenian, French, German. My maestro is from Yerevan Komitas State Conservatory. Komitas is in my repertoire.

Der Kiureghian: You look like an opera singer!

Martirosyan: Thank you. I like that.

Cooper: I think they're supposed to be bigger in girth.

Der Kiureghian: Some are big, some are not.

Cooper: Both of us happen to be speaking at an event coming up in China, and Lia's looking to sing in Mandarin.

Martirosyan: Yes.

Der Kiureghian: Where in China are you going?

Martirosyan: Guangzhou.

Cooper: It's a large event dealing with health and rehabilitation; about 25,000 people will attend.

Der Kiureghian: Only 25,000? For China that's a small event!

(*laughter*)

Martirosyan: Tip of the iceberg.

Cooper: When we were in Washington, DC, at the M-Enabling summit, it was announced that more people are accessing the web on their mobile phones than on desktops, so the fact that some of these platforms, software and apps are not accessible, is a problem.

Der Kiureghian: At the university we have research centers. One of them is supported with a grant from Samsung. We have a professor in computer science who's a very well recognized encryption expert. He and a bunch of students working on projects in that area. In fact, they may turn out to be mobile applications.

Cooper: What's Armenia's major economy?

Der Kiureghian: Armenia doesn't have many resources. It doesn't have oil. It's landlocked, so it doesn't have access to the sea. The joke is that when God was distributing land to countries, Armenians were having fun some place, and by the time they got there, it was too late—

(laughter)

—so he gave them a land full of rocks. In fact, agriculture is difficult, because of the soil, thousands of years ago it was volcanic, and there's lots of rocks you have to clear. The biggest resource is the people. It's almost 100 percent literate, very talented people.

Cooper: You're the only country where everyone learns to play chess.

Der Kiureghian: Less than three million people, and twice we had the number one team in chess. There have been several world champions of Armenian origin. That's why I'm saying the people are very intelligent; they're very talented artistically. So many artists, so many good musicians. Fantastic jazz, classical, chorus, all very high quality. There's mining, gold, molybdenum, copper, which is a curse as well as a blessing, because the way the mining is done, it's not environmentally safe. We have—the university is involved in this—recently set up a center for responsible mining. We did a crowdfunding and received funds. We purchased equipment to measure heavy metals in soil and in water.

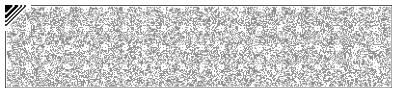
Technology is perhaps the most successful sector in the economy. Many American companies have branches in Armenia that develop software. The biggest of them is Synopsis, which has almost 1,000 engineers. But there are also companies that have started in Armenia that have become very successful, including several who are our graduates. The most successful of these is PicsArt. It's one of the hottest apps for Android and iPhone for editing pictures. It's like—

Cooper: —Photoshop.

Der Kiureghian: —a mobile version of Photoshop, more artistic. It gives you a lot of artistic freedom. It has been downloaded more than 200 million times. Now it's big. One of the co-founders is a good friend of mine. He's now here setting up an office in the Bay Area. So Armenia is becoming recognized as an IT area.

Cooper: Part of your curriculum is computer science?

Der Kiureghian: We award both undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science. Tourism is another sector. The country has hotels, but all in Yerevan. It needs to have more pensions and places with accessibility considerations. It could be an ideal place for tourism, because it's almost like an open-air museum. There are so many monasteries, and they're marvelous. It's not as if they had been built, it's like in nature they grew up. From that stand point it's very unique. So tourism could be a major sector.




Dr. Der Kiureghian & Lia Martirosyan talking AUA

Martirosyan: I'm so glad for all of this.

Der Kiureghian: We have this undergraduate program, and we're very keen on admitting students from abroad because a problem we have is lack of diversity. Of course we're trying very hard to increase it. For example, of our local students, 45 percent receive financial aid. Although tuition is very inexpensive compared to here. For locals, in-state tuition is about $2,500 to $3,000 a year.

Cooper: What does "local" mean?

Der Kiureghian: Citizens of Armenia. For international students, it's double that, $5,000 or $6,000 as compared to here in the States where it's about $50,000. But even though tuition is low for citizens, we give almost 45 percent of them financial aid, so that we have an economically diverse group.

Cooper: The language spoken in your university?

Der Kiureghian: English.

Cooper: We know somebody right now, she's desperately looking for a good MBA program. Is it $5,000 for an MBA?

Der Kiureghian: That's the undergraduate program. For the graduate program, it's the same for locals, but for international students it's three times that. And an MBA would be about $9,000 for an international student. But for good students, we may provide a small scholarship.

Cooper: Is housing cheaper there?

Der Kiureghian: Much. The cost for one person in a single room would be $200 to $250 a month.

Martirosyan: Is the dormitory accessible?

Der Kiureghian: I don't know. We didn't build it. But I can find out. That would be an important thing.
Martirosyan: Especially if you're seeking international diversity. What about as you grow, with more undergraduate students?

Der Kiureghian: With up to 2,000, our current facilities would be okay, but at some point we'll reach capacity. Going forward, we have to build new buildings. And there are houses we might be able to buy and a building about 600 meters from the university that can be made into a dormitory. But for all of these projects, we need donors willing to give several million dollars. Every new building will cost $5 million minimum.

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Cooper: So part of your job is fundraising?

Der Kiureghian: Eighty percent of my job is fundraising.

(laughter)

Martirosyan: That would be something we could team up with One Armenia to build an accessible dormitory 600 meters from the university.

Der Kiureghian: Remember, One Armenia goes for small projects. But to make the main building at Yerevan State University accessible, you only need about $10,000. You could target important buildings one by one.

Cooper: I don't know if you've heard about "Keeping It 100"? It's a segment on Larry Wilmore's new show on Comedy Central.

Der Kiureghian: The guy who replaced Stephen Colbert?

Cooper: Yes. In "Keeping It 100," Wilmore comes up with these interesting questions, and you have to answer right away. Then he'll either throw the person a bunch of tea bags, or give them a sticker that says, "You kept it 100," which means you answered honestly." I'm going to ask you a "Keep it 100" question. So here goes: If one of the Kardashians were to donate some money to the school, would you give them an honorary degree?

Der Kiureghian: *(laughs)* It just happens that the Kardashians are going to Armenia soon. We've discussed them visiting campus. To be honest, I respect Kim Kardashian because she's talked about recognition of the Armenian genocide. She's putting some serious effort behind that aspect of her past. If she wants to come visit the university and meet our students—and the students would go wild—I would welcome her. However, we haven't given any honorary degrees.

Martirosyan: How about starting with Lia Martirosyan?

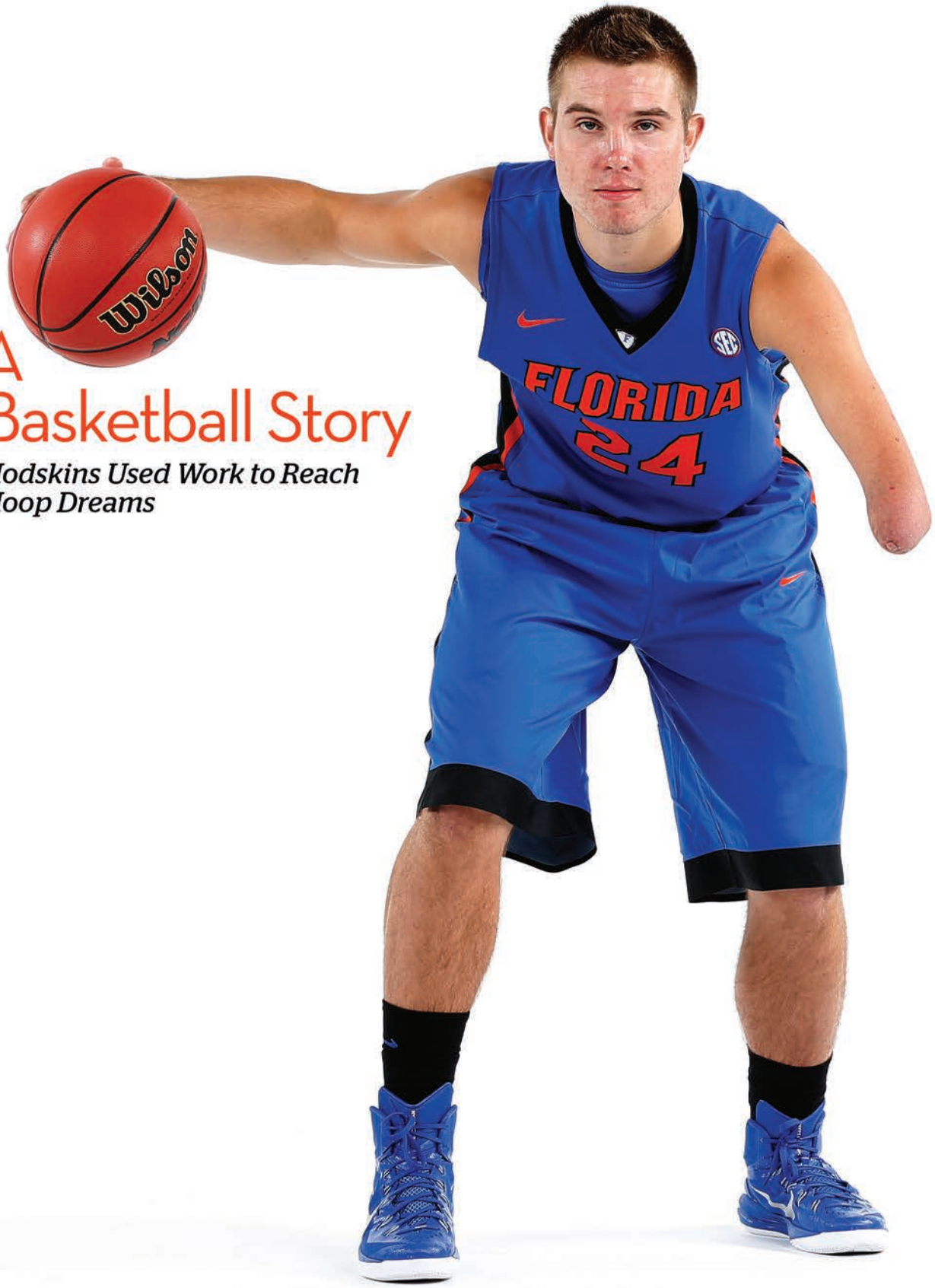
Der Kiureghian: *(laughs)* If you were there, we would invite you to do a rendition during our graduation, an artistic part.

Cooper: That would be fun.

Martirosyan: I'd be honored. I'm always keeping in mind how I can stay connected to my roots.

Der Kiureghian: If you ever visit, let me know in advance. We'll set up something special. ■ ABILITY

www.aua.am
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A Basketball Story

Hodskins Used Work to Reach Hoop Dreams

The bio on Zach Hodskins reads like this: Walk-on who enrolled at University of Florida for the Summer B term of 2014; Has a great 3-point stroke; Able to create looks off the dribble, particularly in the open floor.

It's a basic scouting report for a 6-foot-4, 203-pound walk-on guard in college basketball. Hodskins, however, rarely receives a basic response when he sets foot on the hardwood. Hodskins was born without the lower part of his left arm, yet his basketball skills carried him through high school as a smooth shooter on powerhouse Milton High School in Alpharetta, Georgia, and now to the University of Florida where he was invited as a walk-on with the basketball team.

The freshman made his college hoops debut on November 14 when the Gators hosted William & Mary in Gainesville. With Florida comfortably ahead late in the game, head coach Billy Donovan called Hodskins's number to check in. When the public address announcer bellowed, "No. 24, Zach Hodskins!" into the microphone, the stale crowd that was watching a blowout erupted in cheers, whistles, claps and a standing ovation.

Hodskins is used to getting high praise even before he's taken a shot. His fans cheer for him. Opposing fans applaud his efforts. Sometimes even opponents on the court show appreciation or even give him a little extra space to dribble since he is, after all, playing basketball with just one hand.

It always gives Hodskins a sneaky smile because those people don't know what's coming next.

"That's been the story of my life," Hodskins said. "People see me at first at the point where I'm called in the starting lineup or walking onto the floor and they don't know me. Halfway through the game, they realize this isn't some sob story. This kid's actually really good and can play with the best of them."

Hodskins's basketball coach at Milton High School, Matt Kramer, believed Hodskins could play from the first time he saw the kid stroke a long-range jumper. Kramer took over the Milton team during the summer leading into Hodskins's senior year of high school. Hodskins wasn't worried about impressing another coach or masking his disability. He knew once Kramer saw him shoot, there would be nothing to discuss.

"If Zach couldn't play, he wouldn't play for me," Kramer said. "But honest to God, when I took the job and was told about him and knew I already had several college prospects, I wondered how this kid was going to get out there and play with these kids. I'm telling you, you know it immediately when you see it. He is just like everybody else."

Hodskins has spent a lifetime trying to prove that he's not on basketball teams just out of pity or obligation. He's also tried to shed a label that has followed him his entire career. Google "Zach Hodskins" and nearly each of the entries identifies him as "One-handed Zach Hodskins."

"I'm not going to say I need to prove people wrong because I don't feel like I have to prove anything," Hodskins said. "I've worked so hard in my life that I've gotten to the point now where people, hopefully, view me as a basketball player instead of the kid who plays with one hand."

Developing His Touch

Hodskins started playing basketball as a young kid growing up in Lexington, Kentucky, a basketball hotbed in the heart of the country. He loved the Kentucky Wildcats and also appreciated the Indiana Hoosiers, both college basketball programs with rich histories of success on the hardwood.

Hodskins worked on his game with his father, and both realized his strength may not be driving the basketball because he could only use his right hand. So, they spent hours each evening working on his jumper from long range. The family moved to Hilton Head, South Carolina, then Brentwood, Tennessee, just outside of Nashville, before settling in a suburb just outside of Atlanta. Hodskins played baseball, soccer, and even learned to ride the waves on a surfboard. But basketball was his love, and he worked with his dad to perfect his game.

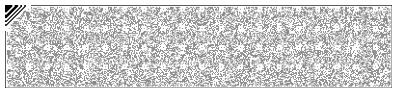
"We focused on my shot form and getting stronger at that," Hodskins said. "By my sophomore year of high school, I was shooting from beyond NBA 3-point range with ease."

Hodskins worked with his coaches along the way to develop his shot, and he worked with his dad at night. Shot after shot, he continued to strengthen his abilities until long-range shooting made Hodskins a commodity on the court in high school.

"Any time a kid is capable of shooting the ball from 24 or 25 feet, he's going to hurt you," Kramer said. "It makes it tough for the opposing defense to lock in and give help to other places on the floor. It's a real luxury to have a guy like that."

Hodskins let his shots fly his senior season for Milton. He averaged 11.8 points per game and shot 29 percent from 3-point range. Hodskins found his stroke during an eight-game stretch late in the season, dropping in nearly 23 points each time his team took the floor.

One of his fondest memories was as a junior when his shot got hot against rival Roswell and he made 8-of-10 3-pointers, feeding off the crowd and adding to the excitement in the packed gymnasium. The defense left him open at first, but that quickly changed once he began draining shots. "If an opponent doesn't know who







Hodskins leaving it all on the court

I am or hasn't seen me play before, they'll play off of me and give me shots at the start," Hodskins said. "After a few plays, I'll knock down shots and they start guarding me like any player."

Work That Pays Off

Hodskins has always been willing to put in the extra time to develop his game, starting when he was putting up shots with his father every evening.

In high school, he woke up at 6:30 and got to school by 7, when he'd shoot in the gym for more than an hour until school began at 8:30. After school dismissed at 3:30, he either had basketball practice with the team or conditioning drills until 6:30. Then he went with teammates to a local gym and shot for three more hours until 9:30. He'd finish his homework, hit the bed, and do it all again the next day.

Hodskins biggest concern as he progressed through high school was dribbling to his left side. He said opponents liked to force him to the left to exploit what they perceive as a weakness.

"But as I've come up, I've always worked with coaches on moves to go left because we knew it would be coming," Hodskins said. "I have all these counter moves to step back or step in front of them. I can usually do better when people force me left than when I go right. I've worked on it so much that it's now to my advantage when they do force me left."

It's just another example of how Hodskins has worked hard to make sure he's prepared to reach his dream.

"People would ask why I work myself that hard, but I'm not," Hodskins said. "It's something I really love to do. It's fun for me."

Just before his senior year of high school, a highlight video of Hodskins went viral on the Internet. It showed him draining 3-pointers from all over the court. It showed him driving the lane to the basket. It showed him getting a defensive stop, then forcing a turnover. News media picked up on the story, and suddenly life became even busier for Hodskins.

His father, Bob, told GatorZone.com that the family received interview requests from media from across the United States, England, and India.

"Honestly, I was doing like three interviews a day,"

Hodskins said. “People wanted to call me every day. It was wild.”

Media flocked to Alpharetta to see Hodskins practice and play. And so did college coaches.

Milton already had a star-studded basketball team with a starting lineup full of NCAA Division-I prospects. Coaches came from across the country to try and lure Milton’s players to their programs. Former Milton player Mo Lewis wound up at the Naval Academy Preparatory School and plans to play for Navy next season. His younger brother, Chris Lewis, is a senior at Milton and has committed to Harvard. Shawn O’Connell is now a freshman at Georgia Southern. Coaches also came to see Hodskins, who came off the bench his senior season.

“Obviously the attention that Zach got brought people into our gym that otherwise might not have been there,” Kramer said. “So some of the other kids benefitted from that because nobody might have known who they were. People would walk into the open gym to watch and be like, ‘Wait a second. Who’s that kid?’”

The Next Level

The summer before his high school senior season, Hodskins played on his AAU basketball team that drew quite a bit of attention from college coaches. One of them was Florida’s coach Donovan.

Donovan has never had trouble filling his roster at Florida. During his 19 years as coach of the Gators, he took Florida to the Final Four on four occasions and won the 2006 and 2007 national championships. His teams have won the Southeastern Conference six times and the SEC tournament four times. Donovan, quite simply, has established Florida as a national power.

Donovan’s walk-ons know they have a role to fill. They likely won’t see a lot of playing time and won’t score a lot of points. His most successful walk-on is current senior Jacob Kurtz who has scored 56 career points, according to GatorZone.com.

Hodskins had other opportunities to play at good programs and perhaps be a leader on the floor and continue to help teams with his sweet shot. But when Donovan extended an offer for Hodskins to become a non-scholarship walk-on at Florida, he accepted because he wanted to be part of one of the most successful college basketball programs in the country.

“One day they saw me playing at an AAU tournament. That’s how it always works,” Hodskins said. “That’s what every kid hopes for, that one day you get seen by the college coach. It happened to me and it happened to be Florida. They fell in love with my game and contacted me. It was finally a dream-come-true because I had worked so hard for that moment. I was so happy to finally get an opportunity.”

In college at Florida, it’s more of the same. Hodskins juggles daily practices with the Gators, workout sessions, attending classes, and checking in at study hall. And then there are the games.

Back in that first game of the season, when Hodskins checked in he inbounded the basketball, then ran to the corner to set up for his high-powered 3-point shot. A few plays later, the basketball swung over to Hodskins. His defender was playing far away and took a step closer. Hodskins faked a 3, then drove the lane and put up a running layup. It missed.

Still, the crowds have roared each time Hodskins has touched the ball this season.

“I get that people are interested and attracted to the story because of his limitations, and I get that he’s an inspiration to a lot of people, but I don’t want that for him here,” Florida coach Donovan told GatorZone.com earlier this season. “I want him to feel like another player in our program—and I think he wants that, too. He’s not looking to be someone who is the face of overcoming obstacles. He’s a young kid who wants to be a normal kid and doesn’t want anyone to take it easy on him.”

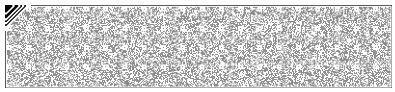
Perhaps that desire is what led Hodskins to accept a walk-on invitation from Donovan and the Gators. He feeds off of monumental challenges.

“The thing that’s made Zach great is that he’s played his entire life with that chip on his shoulder and had to overcome something that’s so visible to everybody,” Kramer said. “I’ve coached kids who are too small to play at the next level and overcome that. I’ve coached kids who are too slow to play at the next level and they’ve found ways to overcome that. There are a lot of things that could be termed ‘disabilities’ in the game of basketball because you have to be so versatile of an athlete with so many different skills to be good at it. Zach just has another obstacle to overcome. All of those things can be overcome by working hard on your individual skills. Zach, like those other kids, has done just that.”

Kramer continued: “The best complement that I can give Zach is that he’s just like everybody else. I think that’s what he’s strived for, to shed that disability and say, ‘Look at me, I can do this just like everybody else.’ And he’s done that.” ■ ABILITY

by Josh Pate

Zach Hodskins, GatorZone.com
gatorzone.com/basketball/men/bios.php?year=2014&player_id=59
To Dream the Possible Dream:
Walk-on Zach Hodskins Sees No Barriers
gatorzone.com/story.php?id=28406



redefining MS



"No, I am not one of Jerry's kids. That's muscular dystrophy."

"No, Michael J. Fox does not have multiple sclerosis (MS). He has Parkinson's."

I have MS. Before MS came into my life, I must admit some of these diseases all blended together for me too. A quick search on the internet will define MS as an autoimmune disease of the central nervous system. The immune system, which is supposed to fight viruses, gets turned on for some unknown reason in people with MS and begins to damage the fatty tissue called myelin, which surrounds and protects the nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. When this attack happens, we refer to it as a relapse, exacerbation or flair.

These attacks cause a multitude of possible symptoms, depending upon which part of the body is connected at the other end of the damaged nerve. The signal sent from the brain is slowed, crossed or halted all together. When the attack subsides, or remits, the damaged area may be able to repair itself fully, partially or not at all. There usually remains some scarring or sclerosis. Once a person has had two separate isolated attacks, which typically results in two or more scars, they officially can be diagnosed as having MS. Similarities often end there, as each person affected will have different symptoms and levels of disability depending on where the damage is, number of attacks and levels of recovery.

Traditionally, and before treatments were available to slow disease progression, the disease and its disabling results would progress at a steady rate.

This year, I'm celebrating 10 years without any real progression of my disease or symptoms. Thanks to drug companies like Biogen Idec, we now have over a dozen disease modifying therapies that have shown to reduce disease progression by about 50 percent in relapsing forms of MS. This has allowed many of us to stall or circumvent what was once a certainty: increased physical disability. Although it's still an incurable, progressive disease, and medications don't work for every form of MS or for all patients, the definition of what MS is

and what people affected by it can expect to experience has changed tremendously over the last 20 years.

There is a cookie cutter list defining common symptoms of MS, but in reality, symptoms are completely different for every person diagnosed. As a card-carrying member living with some of these *benefits* of MS, I believe I have earned the right to create my very own personalized definitions.

I also think creating less intimidating names and even goofy excuses for when symptoms rear their ugly heads can be a healthy way to deal with any chronic disease. For me, it takes away some of the fear and power of a disease that can have so many unknowns. Because of my cognitive issues, I even created my own official diagnosis. I tell people I have *Artistic MS*, because I draw a lot of blanks.

MS is also no longer a dirty four-letter word in my house because I've decided the letters MS are now going to stand for Motor Cycle. Do I have MS? Why, yes, I do. In fact, I've owned 36 of them over the past 30 years, and I ride my MS all over the country.

Here is how I describe some common MS symptoms:

MS FATIGUE - I'm sick and tired of explaining to people why MS fatigue is different from just being sick and tired. I now explain MS fatigue as how someone would feel after running all the way home... from Europe. And then I tell them to imagine feeling this level of exhaustion after doing nothing more than just buttering toast in the morning.

SPASTICITY - Some people get stiffness and pain. I get these twitching episodes, usually in my legs and usually when I am tired. I call mine, air soccer tryouts.

WEAKNESS - My right leg gives way sometimes while walking whether I'm tired or hot, and if I'm in public, I'll announce it pretty loudly with, "Holy smokes, was that an earthquake?" I've also lost some strength and dexterity in my hands which can cause me to fumble and lose my grip. As I've gotten older, I've named this symptom, "Screw the ten second rule, the dog will get it".

VISION ISSUES - Although they're common, I've never experienced optic neuritis or eye problems.

SENSORY ISSUES - I have two areas on my thigh without any feeling that I've named Numb and Nummer. Once in a while I get this weird vibration in my right thigh as if there was a phone ringing on silent in my pocket. I haven't named it yet, so I just yell down to my leg, "Stop calling me, I hate telemarketers."
I often feel a surge of fiery heat running down the back of my right leg. I call it, The Ghost of a Disgruntle Coworker with a Blow Torch.

COGNITION - I deal daily with cognitive issues, and collectively, I still refer to these symptoms with a quote from my very first visit with my neurologist. Not believing that anything was seriously wrong, the doctor said he believed I just had *crap for brains*. I've been proudly running with that professional diagnosis ever since.

I keep forgetting about my memory problems. I should've gone into politics. My ability to answer questions is limited only by my ability to remember the answers. My memory is so bad that when I finally write my memoirs I'm going to call it, No Recollection. I refer to my short term memory issue as the unreliable witness protection program. I'll never be called as an eye witness or picked for jury duty.

HEAT INTOLERANCE - I've a big issue with heat. When I get warm or hot, there is no telling what symptom will reappear or if I will be able to complete simple tasks or even sentences. I get anxious, confused and disorientated. Thankfully, it's only temporary, and when I regain my composure, I explain that as I got overheated my MS transformed into *multiple stupidity*. The hardest part for me is recognizing when the heat is affecting me, to stop what I'm doing and to find a cooler environment before things get ugly.

MS HUG - I've never experienced a symptom they call the MS hug, a tightening and constricting band feeling around the torso, but if I ever do, you can bet I'll reference it somehow with the movie Fifty Shades of Grey.

BLADDER AND BOWL DYSFUNCTION - Bladder symptoms really piss me off. I'm really struggling to find humor in my dishonest bladder. It's cost me time and money, lied to me, tricked me, and on a few occasions, really embarrassed me. Not sure why, but I decided to refer to my bladder symptoms as, The Ex-Wife.

No matter what challenges, illnesses or hardships you encounter at any stage of your life, you must remember that you own it, so you get to do whatever you want with it.

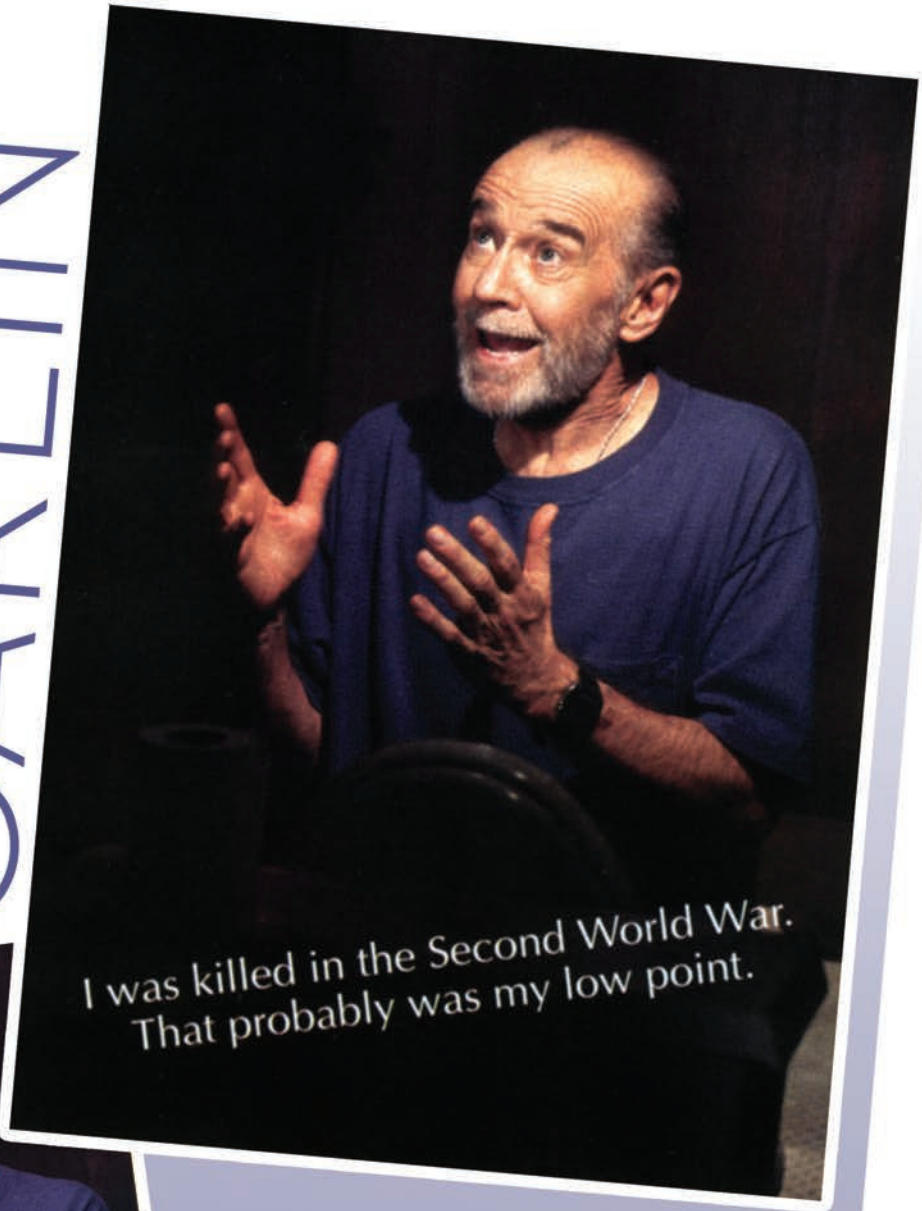
My disease and symptoms will never control or define who I am. If you look up MS in any dictionary, I guarantee you will never see my picture. With advances in treatment options and staying positive, I just keep putting MS in its proper place, a mere footnote in my life's story. ■ ABILITY

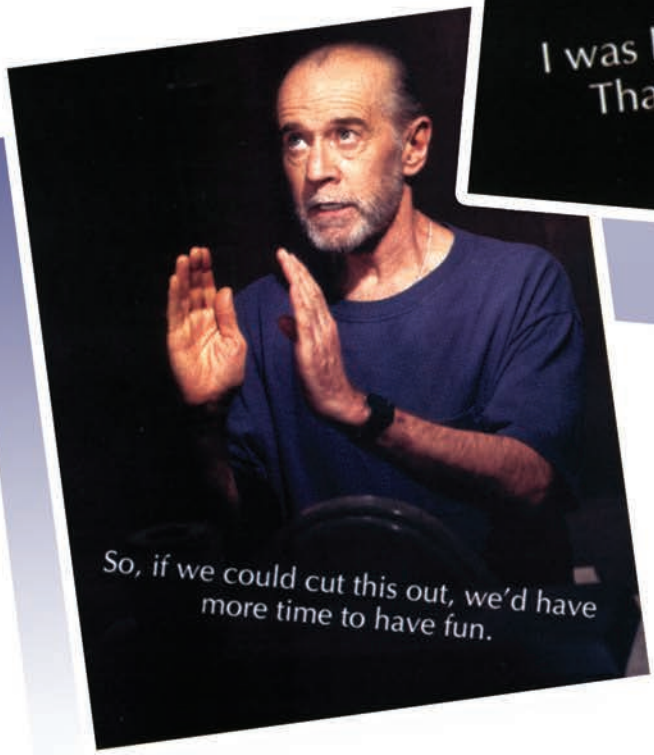
by Longhaulpaul

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circa 1995

GEORGE CARLIN





Jane Wollman Rusoff: Tell me, what has psychotherapy done for you?

George Carlin: It's actually decreased my fortune by half. No, I think I learned quicker, with a little guidance, things I might have learned anyway. Unfortunately, I had to shoot my first two therapists because I thought they knew too much.

JR: What do you do for relaxation?

GC: Sometimes I walk like a horse. Ever do that? It's not easy. I'm sort of on all fours. Sometimes I rear up, settle down again into a nice lope, then segue into a full canter out on the Avenue. And when I come to a red light, I'll often throw my rider.

JR: How do you stay so slim?

GC: I have large sections of flesh cut off by a man with a knife twice a week. I find that losing 30 or 40 pounds worth of flesh twice a week keeps me trim, as long as I have enough clothing, and time to heal. Something that began as a funny thought has really deteriorated into a big ball of crap.

JR: Anything you eat that's unusual?

GC: String. If you get a ball of twine, I don't mean cheap twine. I mean good twine. A little salsa, a little hot sauce can make it quite delectable. This one is deteriorating, too. I would just cut it right off at the string part.

JR: What's that chain around your neck?

GC: I bought this in, of all places, the Vatican. In the Sistine Chapel gift shop. I never looked at the ceiling. Let them keep their lousy paintings; I'm looking for nice gifts. It's a little bull or sheep with ruby eyes, holding a ring in its mouth. And it's the only thing I wear outside of my wedding ring, because I don't like jewelry. I don't like something that is gonna grab on a branch. That's why I stopped wearing my earring. I had a diamond earring before box boys and bankers wore them. I had one 15 or 20 years ago, when it meant you were really stupid. I stopped wearing it because I realized if I were fleeing the police through the woods, it might catch on a branch, and I'd rather go to jail than have a hole in my ear.

JR: But you do have other nice stuff don't you?

GC: First of all, this is the whole problem with the world today: private property. If no one owned anything, it would be a lot better. There's even an entire industry devoted to keeping an eye on other people's stuff. This is how stupid it's got. If you decide to get rid of a lot of your stuff, you can give it to a thrift shop or to Goodwill. Then on the way home, you pass a yard sale and what do you do, you look and say, "gee that's an interesting piece of stuff," and you buy someone else's stuff that they wanted so little that they were willing to sell for a dime. And you take it home and begin a new pile of stuff. So, if we could cut this out, we'd have more time to have fun.

JR: What else is wrong with contemporary society?

GC: Religion, corporate life and the permanent government. I think everybody should be able to do anything they want and let roving bands of people punish each other for things they don't agree with. People with no underwear doing anything they want. Wouldn't that be fun? You wouldn't need television.

JR: Do you have a comic answer for this next...

GC: Weren't any of those other answers comic?

JR: Oh, yes. I mean, this is a new question: colon...

GC: Oh, colon. I think a colon is another thing you shouldn't fool around about. A man's colon is his castle, although it may be time-shared, depending on your point of view.

JR: Do you ever go back to the Upper West Side of New York, where you were actually brought up?

GC: I often go back to New York. I usually have myself dropped out of a blimp directly into the old neighborhood to save the trouble of going uptown on the subway. But sometimes I like to lie in the path of an oncoming subway train and say six Our Fathers and six Hail Mary's. Actually, I usually go to New York to see somebody. That's a big thing in my life: going to see somebody or going to see somebody else. Other times I just go up to the neighborhood and stand there and cry deeply about my past.

JR: Is it also true that you stopped performing for a while in the 70's?

GC: No, I never stopped. I always did about 150 shows a year. I wasn't always present for them, but, I did them...I left a lot of brain cells on the roadside.

JR: You have an odd little sign on your desk: "Mixed Nuts."

GC: Yeah, I stole that. It was one of the toppings in a frozen yogurt store. I could have taken the "M&M's" or the "Sprinkles" sign. But I took the "Mixed Nuts" because it applies to my life.

JR: What was the worst time in your life?

GC: When I found myself walking alone in the forest and animals were after me. No, I never had a worst time. Each moment has been better than the last. And if this in any way conflicts with an earlier answer about the ups and downs of life, disregard one of the two answers. I was killed in the Second World War. That probably was my low point. ■ ABILITY





The Wizard of OZcars

Did you catch the Oscars? Better yet, did you catch Comcast's commercial of Emily's Oz? Little Emily describes what she envisions when experiencing the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. For people who are blind or have visual difficulties, navigating the nubby buttons of a Digital Video Recorder (DVR) is an exercise in frustration, at best. Channel buttons often have the same shape, some buttons are differentiated by color, and there are a lot of them. What if you wanted to find a particular movie on cable? How could you, without assistance, find it, let alone know when it starts and ends? These are just some of the issues Comcast's recently launched "talking" guide and menu system address for its cable TV customers. The talking guide, which is integrated into Comcast's existing X1 operating system, uses voice to communicate channel listings, on-demand movie listings and information about specific programs, such as reviews. And it can be turned on and off by a single button on the remote. It is, according to Comcast, the first voice-prompted DVR, affording users independence and inclusion. To learn more about this pioneering technology, *ABILITY*'s Chet Cooper and Lia Martirosyan spoke with Tom Wlodkowski, vice president of accessibility for Comcast Cable, and Steven Restivo, executive director of communications.

Chet Cooper: Can you explain more about what you guys have launched?

Tom Wlodkowski: Sure. Comcast has a comprehensive accessibility program based in our technology and product organization. I run the accessibility initiative. My peers own the cable set-top box, the web and the mobile apps that we develop, and accessibility is thought of at the beginning of a development project, not as an afterthought or retrofit experience. Our accessibility effort is founded on four fundamental pillars, one being customer engagement, making sure that we're involving people with disabilities throughout the development process of our products and services. The second pillar is product capability, and we'll talk about the launch of our talking guide, which we call a "voice guide." That's our X1 operating system. For the first time in our industry, that has opened up the TV viewing experience and set-top box interface to people who are blind or who have a visual disability. So product capability is the second pillar.

The third pillar is customer service. In October of 2013, we launched our first-ever support center for customers with disabilities, where we have 37-plus agents who are trained on accessibility features that Comcast Xfinity customers can get access to, to improve their experience. The fourth pillar is infrastructure, where we have an accessibility lab that's part of our innovation labs in Philadelphia where we showcase assistive technology. We use it as a working lab, where we bring in executives and user-experience designers, product managers, and engineers to run their products with assistive technologies in the case of a website or mobile application, and then in some cases obviously working with the product teams to build accessibility directly into our products, as we did with the talking guide on our X1 operating system.

So the four pillars make up our accessibility effort. We have made a lot of progress in the past two years, and the biggest milestone right now is our launch of the talking guide, which opens up the TV experience on X1 for people who are blind or who have a visual disability. It's available to all Comcast customers where X1 is available.

Cooper: How long have you been with the company?

Wlodkowski: I've been here since June of 2012. I was brought in to start up the initiative.

Cooper: Where is it available?

Wlodkowski: Anywhere that Comcast cable is available, a customer can request our X1 service. The talking guide is integrated into our X1 service. You don't need any additional hardware, or additional software for that matter, but you do need to get our X1 service, and that's where the talking guide is available. With a simple press of a button on the remote control you can turn it on or off.

Cooper: Does this feature cost extra?

Wlodkowski: We have several different platforms, as you might expect. For eligible customers who are blind or who have a visual disability, we will move that to the X1 platform if they specifically request the talking guide at no additional charge.

Cooper: So they need to know that it's available, but they have to request it?

Wlodkowski: That's correct. If they're new customers, they would probably get X1 anyway. But yes, for existing customers, that's why we're talking with folks like you, and we're using other channels to reach out to the audience so that we can create awareness. It's also why we started this big Emily's Oz campaign as well, to heighten awareness around access to entertainment by people with disabilities, but then specifically focusing on the availability of this talking guide on the X1 operating system.

Cooper: Was it your team who came up with the ad idea, or was it something that had been floating around?

Wlodkowski: The idea came out of an interesting morning walk through the train station with our VP of brand marketing. We were talking about what I was working on from the accessibility side, and I said, "I thought it'd be great if we could include somebody with a disability in a TV commercial." His response was very positive. He said, "Why don't we do that, but it would even be better to talk about products that you're developing when you're ready." That was maybe a year and a half ago, when we were just ramping up. So what you see with this Emily's Oz campaign is the two coming together, wanting to express our interest in reaching out to the disability community and to spark a broader conversation about how people with disabilities already consume or would like to consume entertainment. That's why we have Emily, who's a seven-year-old girl who's blind, describing her visualization of one of her favorite movies, *The Wizard of Oz*, and using the Oscars as the platform to spark a social media conversation. We did a Twitter live chat on this and had some really good responses. Other vehicles include using EmilysOz.com as a platform where people can experience video description. We describe the TV commercial online. We also have a described version of a documentary about the making of the commercial. We have links to our accessibility page, so you can get to know the types of services that are available for people with disabilities, like the talking guide, a voice-enabled remote control, closed captioning, or large-button remote controls for people with dexterity challenges. We're using this platform as a way to highlight the range of services that are available so that people with disabilities might find them and can enhance their XFINITY experience.

Cooper: As you were describing the commercial with Emily, I was wondering if you're 100% blind or legally blind?

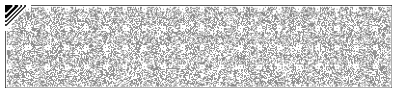
Wlodkowski: I'm totally blind.

Cooper: When Emily described The Wizard of Oz*, was it anything close to what you had envisioned in that movie?*

Wlodkowski: I have to be honest: I hadn't really visualized the movie in that way. I hadn't given it much thought. It's been years since I've watched *The Wizard of Oz*. Her images were vivid and brilliant. What I liked about it wasn't that a seven-year-old girl who's blind was imagining and visualizing *The Wizard of Oz* characters, like the Tin Man and the Scarecrow and the Lion; it was a very smart seven-year-old girl with a brilliant imagination who was interpreting what she's learned and heard about color and the experiences she's had tactilely and through other sensory experiences and then applying that to the movie. And she just happens to be blind. What I liked about that commercial the most was that it's showing how a seven-year-old has this great imagination, and oh, by the way, she just happens to be blind. In that regard, she's not different from any other seven-year-old.

Lia Martirosyan: How did you find her?

Wlodkowski: Goodby Silverstein & Partners in New York was the advertising agency that created the spot, and their casting people reached out to schools for the blind. It turns out that Emily is mainstreamed in a public school, but through the network, a teacher forwarded the casting email to Emily's parents. The agency talked to many different candidates, and Emily was the one they selected.





Emily describing her visualization of the, *The Wizard of Oz*



Cooper: Before the talking guide technology, when you were watching television, what is the difference you've had in your own experience in entertainment and what's happening today?

Wlodkowski: I think you could sum it up in three words: independence, empowerment, and inclusion. Before the talking guide, all someone could do who was blind or who had a visual disability would be to use the channel up and down buttons on the remote control to navigate the thousand-channel universe. With my luck, I stumbled into the show I wanted to watch, but it was a commercial break at the time, so I didn't know that I was on the channel that had my favorite show. You just had to keep going up and down the channels until you found something remotely interesting to watch.

With the voice guidance feature of the talking guide on X1, I can independently navigate the TV listing. I can review it like anyone else. I can look at what channel I'm currently tuned to, find out what program is currently playing, how much time is left within that program, and what the TV rating is for that program. I can navigate what's coming up next on that channel. I can navigate through all the channels and across the grid of the TV listings and find programs that I want. If I know I'll be unavailable to watch a particular program, I can independently schedule a DVR recording of that program.

So not only were TV listings not accessible, but DVR recordings were not accessible. I couldn't control my DVR, either, because I didn't have that voice output coming back at me to allow me to navigate the DVR controls. So it's given me independence. Take that one step further and you look at the 50,000 titles in our video-on-demand library, and I always used to wonder why it took my wife and sons forever to find a movie to watch.

Martirosyan: Now you know!

Wlodkowski: Yes, because again, the talking guide interface is allowing me to navigate, and with the movies, not only do we give you the title and the Motion Picture Association rating, but the running time of the movie and the price, if that's relevant. We give you the Rotten Tomatoes critics' rating and the audience rating. I'm able to participate in that social aspect of it. So independence.

I say empowerment because now I can find something that everybody is talking about or will be talking about. We know that TV and movies are such a part of our pop culture. It's what gets discussed around the office water cooler in the break room. Someone with a disability, someone who's blind in this case, could feel marginalized if they didn't have access to that content. It's empowerment and inclusion. I can make the choice of what I want to watch. I can find it independently, and then I can talk about what I watched with everyone else, just like they can, at work the next day. I think that's how this has changed.

We've gotten good feedback from customers. We had one couple, both of them are blind, and they have a sighted baby. You can imagine, when you have a little one, you don't have much time to do anything except take care of the little one. They said that before, they used to have to choose whether to go out to dinner or watch their favorite TV show. Now with the talking guide, they do both. They can record their show and go out to dinner, just like everybody else. We heard from a woman in her twenties who said that for the first time she was able to schedule and play back a DVR recording and buy her favorite movie on demand. How many people in their twenties have been doing that since forever in their lives? So the type of feedback that we're getting speaks to the game-changing impact that the talking guide has had on this audience.

Martirosyan: I don't use Comcast in my area, so I don't know, but are we talking about a box that's doing this?

Wlodkowski: X1 is a set-top box. It's what we call a cloud-based service. You have to have a box. Think of it as almost like a web browser, and I'm probably grossly oversimplifying what the box is doing. It's obviously doing much more than that—processing video and

audio and everything else. But the box will go out to the Comcast network and pull in the X1 interface. When you have the talking guide enabled, it's going out and pulling in audio that describes the TV listing or the menu item that's highlighted. We didn't have to install any additional hardware or software on the box because the accessibility solution sits in the cloud, just like the rest of the X1 interface. Which is what made it a lot faster for us to get to this point.

If we'd had to try to do this three years ago, you would have had to find a box that was powerful enough to be able to install text-to-speech software on it so you could deliver the voice. Now, not only can we deploy it faster, we can also evolve it and update it incrementally. Right now there's a team working on screens that we haven't made accessible yet. We have the core components out there, the TV listings, the on-demand, the DVR, the settings areas. But there are still parts of the X1 interface that we need to unlock, that we need to attach to the talking guide. And the nice part about it is that we didn't have to wait to launch the product. We can just roll in updates, similar to how your mobile device can get updates, and the customer wakes up the next morning and additional screens are accessible that weren't the day before.

Steven Restivo: In a typical year, we'll roll out thousands of upgrades, changes and improvements to that interface. Regarding Tom's point, big, small, or in between, the platform is flexible enough that as we see areas of improvement or things that need tweaking, we can do those in real time.

Cooper: What is happening with the closed captioning for different shows that you distribute?

Wlodkowski: We have the capability of displaying captions across multiple platforms—our set-top boxes and mobile apps and TV websites—plus the ability to adjust fonts, background colors, window opacity and all sorts of enhanced closed-caption settings. We're always looking at how we can further improve that. Easier access to turn on and off closed captioning. We've made a lot of progress in that area over the past couple of years. Closed captioning is one of the most received questions that we get into our support center from customers with disabilities. We know that's an area we need to focus on, and we have some other exciting work to pursue to make it even better.

Cooper: What about descriptive narrative? What's happening on that front?

Wlodkowski: The biggest set piece for us is video description with two projects in that area. One is, someone who's blind can finally turn on and off the secondary audio program, or SAP audio, where the video description is made available. You might recall that the FCC instituted a mandate where broadcast networks and top five cable networks have to make 50 hours of programming available with description per quarter. That was great, but people couldn't access the menu to turn on and off the audio channel to get at that narration. And now with the talking guide on X1, they can go into our accessibility settings and turn on and off the video description as needed. Again, that independence; they don't have to wait for sighted assistance to turn it on and off. Because obviously when a program doesn't have description, you might hear Spanish, because it shares the same audio stream that Spanish broadcasts use. We're working to look at that down the road as well.

We have some devices that have a dedicated button on the remote control that turn on and off both closed captions and video descriptions. That's what we call one-touch access. Our DTA device is one example. The next big front for video description is on-demand. We want to make our on-demand content as accessible as content is in live TV so when either a TV program or a film have description, those programs and films are made available on demand. We want the description track to come with it.

Right now we have a folder on-demand for described video. We have a small number of titles there now, partnering with NBCUniversal to deliver some of the content. We want that to increase over time. We're excited that at least we have some content on-demand, but we know we have a lot of work to do to expand and bring it on par with on-demand as a whole. So more to come there, but at least we've got a stake in the ground.

Martirosyan: Do you have multiple languages in the system?

Wlodkowski: Funny you should ask. My team is also responsible for localization as well, because we believe there's an intersection between accessibility and localization. You need to get at the core code to really effect change. We're working now to support multiple languages. As we introduce new languages, we will also open up that support for the talking guide as well. So stay tuned—more to come on that. ■ ABILITY

emilysoz.com
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MAX GAIL'S THIRD ACT

The actor shot to fame as Detective Wojciehowicz in the classic TV sitcom *Barney Miller*. From there, Max Gail's varied life has taken a host of twists and turns. Recently he got a new set of knees that's set him off on his latest adventure, which includes music, technology, and the occasional acting gig. Here he speaks with *ABILITY*'s Lia Martirosyan.

Lia Martirosyan: How's it goin', Max?













If each photo says a thousand words: cast of *Barney Miller* and Max in *DC Cab*

Max Gail: (*laughs*) The main thing for me right now is that my recovery from knee surgery is *goin'* really well. But the doctor told me, you'll be full of energy and then, around this time of day, you'll start to nosedive, because there's still a lot of healing going on. So that's been the biggest change in my life. Also my twin sister, Mary, is in town from Berlin.

Martirosyan: A twin sister?

Gail: And there are two other sets of twin girls in my family.

Martirosyan: Are any of your other siblings in entertainment?

Gail: Mary is a singer-songwriter in the jazz-performance art realm. She also teaches. As I was saying, she lives in Berlin, where her daughter married a young German guy some years ago, and they have a family there. They're all coming to visit. But Mary teaches at a couple of universities there and does her music. My brother is also an actor.

Those were the two artists in the family. It was a surprise that I ended up in acting. I don't know whether to call it a career or a careen.

(*laughter*)

Martirosyan: Let's go back to your knees. How did the pain start, and when did you realize that you would need surgery?

Gail: I played football for a long time and first injured one of my knees in high school. During my college days, having your knee operated on was sort of a warrior's badge. In those days, they just took out the cartilage if it was torn. They weren't really thinking down the road. And so there's some mystery to the whole thing with my knee, whether it's just arthritis or some kind of autoimmune issue. But over time, I just got more and more bow-legged, and I've been going without cartilage in my knees for a long time.

I had these knobby old legs, and I was calculating every trip to the john, or how long I'd be standing if I went to the market. Finally I found a doctor I trusted, and he said, "I can tell you that after surgery your legs will be straight, and they won't hurt," and that's true. The experience also gave me a chance to empathize with people who have greater challenges. I feel very fortunate that I'm where I am now, because I feel like the next 10 years are going to be more fun.

Martirosyan: I hope so. Pain is something that goes under the radar in most people's psyches, but it's a big deal.

Gail: For the most part, we have amnesia around pain

once it goes away, otherwise mothers would never have second children.

Martirosyan: How's the pain now? Are you walking around much?

Gail: I am, and I have more range of motion than I had when I went into surgery, so if I do my yoga practice I should be able to get the flexibility to squat all the way down. I've also had back issues. But it's all coming along.

Martirosyan: Have you started physical therapy?

Gail: I had a great home physical therapist, but now I can go out to therapy. You met one of my therapists in the hospital; all of her main work is in energy. But for 16 years she did hands-on bodywork. She even spent a couple of years studying cadavers, so she knows the physical body, as well as the energy body. Between the two therapists, I've had great support. They say I'm ahead of the curve, and all I had to do was keep getting up, moving and being thankful.

Martirosyan: When we saw you at the hospital, you weren't sure exactly what they had done. Were you able to check out the x-rays and figure it out?

Gail: I came across an animation on knee replacements, but I had put off looking at it. It's pretty amazing. I tend to pooh-pooh modern medicine in a way because there's so many things that they don't know, and my life has been touched by people dealing with cancer and other things. They had things they could try for cancer, but they weren't really solutions. So it's pretty amazing when they open up your knee, push parts of it off to the side, do some cutting, drilling, add some plates, and then line everything up with computers. It's a problem with a solution.

Martirosyan: Have you missed any auditions in the process?

Gail: I missed a couple, but I've been out for several situation comedies, where I went, wagged my tail, and read. But at the same time they weren't series that I was comfortable with as an actor. And so far, I haven't gotten any of them. But I've seen a lot of actors I've known over the years out auditioning, and there aren't many parts for those of us in our 70s. The sitcoms are all written by people around 30.

They're not clued into how an older person thinks. And in a way, the style of comedy and what people are going for these days is more edgy. But I saw Tommy Chong [of Cheech and Chong] the other day. He went out for a part, and didn't get it, either. It was for a Whoopi Goldberg pilot. I want to work, and would love to bring in a little more cash, because there are some things I would like to take care of with my kids. Another aspiration is music; Chet and I came together around something called LAPS. It started out being about how to get access to computers.

Martirosyan: LAPS?

Gail: Local Access Places. When I first got connected to computers, the browser had been developed by some college students, which went on to become Netscape. Then Microsoft said, "Maybe we should have done something about a browser," and they made a browser. Now we have a whole bunch of different browsers. But that's really what's opened up the floodgates on the Internet. There were a lot of people who thought, "Wow, this is a way people can talk and connect with each other around social, environmental and justice issues, so we can make the world a better place." I was enthused about that. And I saw it as a matter of getting access. We didn't have computers in our pockets like we have with our smartphones now.

I knew a lot of people from the reservation who were going to need support getting access to computers and learn how to use them and the Internet. And I had met Chet a while before that; we made a good connection. It just hit me that it was more about changing people's paradigms around access in the disability community. So during those years we spent a lot of time together. It seemed like a lot of our work overlapped.

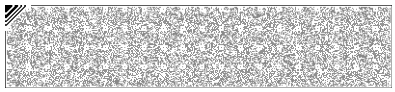
Martirosyan: It's nice that you found common ground.

Gail: Yes. In time I came to see that the biggest challenge was that it's hard for people to simply circle up and share who they are, something that most indigenous people still do; something our ancestors did in one way or another. Their lives weren't so busy. So that's been a mission for me. But I learned pretty quickly that my vision was not a vision that was going to make a lot of money.

A lot of other people saw possibilities, people who knew about writing code and had other visions that led to things like Facebook, YouTube and Google. So now we have this world that's kind of run by a small number of very, very large monopolies created by people who were fans of Ayn Rand (author of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, who advocated reason as the only means of acquiring knowledge and rejected faith and religion.) It's a mystery to me how anybody can follow her and have sensible things to say. But nonetheless, that's where we are now, and it's a pretty interesting place. Life unfolds in its own way.

Martirosyan: You mentioned music as one of the other projects you had in mind. What are you doing with music?

Gail: I grew up in a musical family. My dad was a piano player, and one of the businesses that helped him raise seven kids was booking bands; the other was a small office supply company. It was my twin sister who took piano lessons. I grew up around a lot of music from the





Max Gail on the set of *The Frontier*

'30s, '40s, and '50s. I got into playing in junior high, and learned Rock 'n' Roll. In those days it was all three-chord and four-chord songs. By learning chords, I was able to get piano-bar gigs through college and graduate school.

When I sidestepped into acting in San Francisco, which was for me a great time of connecting to my innermost feelings, I was more of a science geek, an economics guy. But even as I was exploring Carl Jung and psychiatry, it was acting that opened my interior and sensibilities. I started writing songs. It wasn't like, "Oh, I'm going to write a song at this time," it was more like rhymes would come to me easily.

Martirosyan: That must've been nice.

Gail: I think a lot of that was due to the fact that I grew up knowing a lot of great songs; they were written in the '30s and '40s. By the '50s, they'd gotten a little corny. These songs started coming to me, which were a way of integrating and bringing forward my own spiritual growth and path. That led to a connection with Buffy Saint-Marie. She invited me to be an opening act for a tour she was putting together in Australia. It didn't happen, but through Buffy, I met all these people involved with the American Indian movement, and my main acting experience, until then, had been doing the stage play *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

I did it in San Francisco when Alcatraz (the infamous federal penitentiary) was being occupied, and I performed it in New York when Wounded Knee (the 1890 massacre of more than 200 men, women, and children of the Lakota nation in South Dakota) was being talked about again. So there was, in a way, a reassertion of sovereignty rights for the American people.

Martirosyan: What effect did all of that have on you?

Gail: I began to connect with American Indian people, so they knew I wasn't some undercover guy coming in. I began to be identified with smart humor, which is highly valued in the Indian world. The image of Indians is stoic, and they'll get quiet if they feel like they're some place where they aren't understood, but within that world, humor and insightfulness are essential to finding a good path. I also was exposed to a spiritual connection that was not in conflict with anything I was raised to believe in the Episcopal Church. There are universals that all religions tap into; it's the externals that are different. And so those songs continued to be a path for me. That was where I was headed after *Barney Miller* ended in 1982.

I recorded an album of songs in conjunction with good musicians, who were interested in playing with me; I also got married and had a kid, and soon found out that my wife had cancer. So the music got put on the back


Selfie with John Hamm, on the set of Mad Men


Anastassia Sendyk, Max and Coleman Kelly


Max and Ron Glass *Barney Miller* reunion


The first group selfie, with Chet Cooper & Hillary Clinton

burner. Now the kids are all grown, and I'm finding myself interested in playing more. My life partner now Chris, whom you met, is into percussion, including congas. So music is something I want to do more of.

Martirosyan: That's great. You're surrounded by music. I remember a clip of you from a video of an ABILITY House build; you were playing piano.

Gail: Yeah, I did a couple of songs at a benefit. What interested me was what I saw Chet doing, the way he had created this magazine. He had a really interesting entrepreneurial background, and decided to focus it on something that had meaning. He was doing it in a way that brought the policy stories together with the personal stories, to create a magazine that focused on abilities. It came from the standpoint that everybody's going be disabled at some point. Chet approached everything with a persistent humor and openness that was incredible. So when he invited me to participate in a lot of the conferences, I got involved with community access, community technology centers, and community networks. In the Department of Commerce and Department of Labor at that time, there were different policies and practices that were supportive, but Washington politics being what they are, things changed.

I remember going back to a HUD conference in Atlanta one year, when Chet talked with the folks at Habitat for Humanity. They were starting to get pressure to build accessible houses. But they were saying, "Come on, we do a lot of good." They were caught up in the notion that it was going to cost a lot more money to build accessible homes. And Chet showed them that it doesn't cost more to include a ramp or design counters that you can roll a chair under when you're building a house from the ground up. It was even harder for him to get them to take on people with disabilities as volunteers; they're always thought of as being on the needing end, and yet have a lot to offer. I think that raised even more red flags; people worried that somebody might fall off a roof and get hurt.

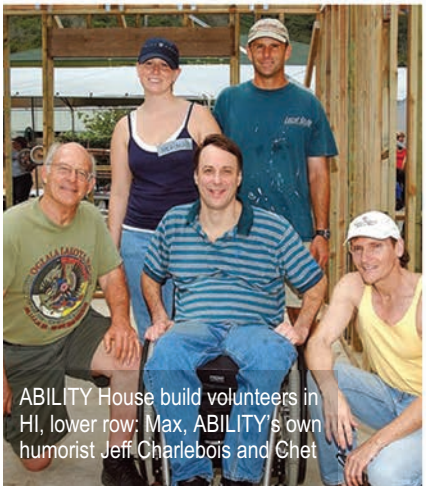
Martirosyan: So what happened with that?

Gail: Chet was able to persuade them to give it a shot, and it was immediately successful. The first one down in Birmingham, AL—the energy and spirit around that build was fantastic. I remember one of the engineers who worked for Habitat for Humanity saying, "We should be filming this right now, and streaming it on the Internet!" That was my feeling, too. But we never did get the green light to shoot video or stream it on the Internet.

And then the next builds near Washington, and another in Hawaii, which was also in conjunction with a big benefit that Chet helped organize around the Pacific Rim conference on disabilities, was quite something. The guys who were building the house had a small,



Max with his 3 beautiful daughters



ABILITY House build volunteers in HI, lower row: Max, ABILITY's own humorist Jeff Charlebois and Chet



Post knee surgey, right before he sprints out the door

hard-core group of Habitat volunteers, who were used to getting houses built, and were not very excited about a bunch of volunteers showing up who didn't have full ability or experience in the trade. But they came around. That was a wonderful build, too.

Martirosyan: What happened next on this long and winding road or yours?

Gail: I reached a time where I had burned through all my stash—what was left of it after my wife's terminal illness. I was taking care of my children, and not working for a few years. I was trying to figure out what was happening; what to do next; and how to survive. So a carrot and a stick brought me back to California and to Hollywood. I began to work a bit as an actor, and to connect with this gathering of people from the media, entertainment and technology realms, which are not far apart from each other. Media is the news; entertainment is movies and TV; and technology is computers. Now they're all totally mixed in with one another. So a lot of this has been how to survive and what's going happen; everything's been up in the air.

Martirosyan: I was just thinking how those were some great memories you brought up about the ABILITY House.

Gail: I would like to say that I do think that when Chet and I first met, I was thinking that *ABILITY* could have been a place-based TV sitcom, like *Barney Miller* (police department) or *Cheers* (bar), and you could use that form to create the television part of LAPs. And it could then become interactive with community technology centers.

Martirosyan: Didn't you guys come up with something on the web?

Gail: There were different times when we put different things up. Certainly there were LAPs that we ran in parks and recreation departments. It turns out people really getting into a circle and talking to each other about what's in their LAPs—their domains of care and responsibility, sharing who they are—leads to meaningful dialogue. It can happen sometimes with people who've been working together for years, but never had that kind of conversation with each other. Their meetings are all about getting to the practical outcome or something. But at the time, TV networks were starting to hemorrhage their audience to cable, so they were struggling. But I was dealing with an illness in my family, and becoming a single parent. And whatever fairy dust I had on me right after *Barney Miller* had long been washed off. They had started putting out offers to movie stars and others to create half-hour shows that would draw an audience. Most of those failed, and by then they had changed the laws so that networks were allowed to own shows, and were getting their hands into it.
In the days that *Barney Miller* was on, the networks couldn't own the show, so independent producers like Norman Lear and Danny Ailes had a certain amount of control and last say over what their stories were going to be, and how their characters were going to develop. So

the idea of me having the know how and the energy to create not only a sitcom, but a new kind that was actually interactive was a big idea. What I learned was that being ahead of your time is not that different from being wrong.

(laughter)

But interestingly now we're at a time where more and more people are saying, "What are people doing on the web? Maybe we'll go to them?" And other people say, "I've got a new idea. I want to try this out on the web and see if we can find an audience or a group of people to participate with it." And then when the network comes to me, I can say, "Yeah, I'll do a show, but I'm in control; we're in control. This is what we're doing, not something that's going to change after the first week."

It is the time to be able to do that, and many people are world-weary of a media that breaks everything down to a debate. Every issue gets divided into two sides on the lowest common denominator. What can the argument be? It's become so much silliness and very destructive and paralyzing. So my own feeling is that this is a time where we're just facilitating and giving people a model for a simple way to circle up, share who they are, and keep the conversation moving as a way to do something different. So I feel kind of enthused about this particular time, and my only question is: What is my own personal energy level. I'm in my early 70s, and I'm just not running around like I did once.

Martirosyan: You've got some new knees, though.

Gail: I've got new knees.

(laughs)

Martirosyan: What's your favorite movie?

Gail: Boy, I don't know.

Martirosyan: You're supposed to say 42.

Gail: Well, I did like *42*, and I was really glad to be a part of it, because it had a whole bunch of people really working to make a good movie, working in a really good way. And it was a good movie.

Martirosyan: How did it feel for you stepping back into that time where there was so much—I don't like to use the H-word—but hatred towards a group of people who were different?

Gail: I had had some experience with it. For a few years our family used to drive down from Michigan to Florida, and I would spend the second semester of my school year there. So in sixth and seventh grade, I encountered white towns and "colored" towns, and whites-only drinking fountains. Detroit was a fairly segregated world. There were black communities and white communities. We shot *42* down in Birmingham, and Chattanooga, TN, and a couple of places in Georgia, because they have a lot of old ballparks that are still part of the minor baseball league, and were easy to retrofit and use as stadiums.

I think what struck me when we were down there was that they had a certain number of paid extras and a lot of volunteer extras, who were dressed in the wool clothing of the '40s. And those were long, hot days in the sun. And the sequence that involved the manager of Philadelphia, I think it was, with all the name-calling and taunting of Jackie Robinson took three days to shoot. It was an amazing sequence where everyone came together to honor that time, knowing that things are different today. But not totally different, as we look at what's been going on.

Martirosyan: That was an intense scene.

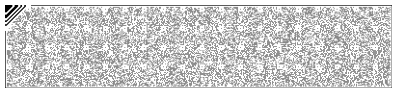
Gail: Yes. It was a great experience to be a part of a company that helped to keep the connection. And there were several African-American production assistants. They were college kids who were outspoken and smart. There was a time when Sammy Davis, Jr., was seen as kind of an "oreo," black on the outside and white on the inside, during the Civil Rights Movement because he went along with the Rat Pack. There were those who felt that Jackie Robinson hadn't been as outspoken as he should have been, that he kind of kowtowed. But those productions assistant didn't really know him. And they didn't know much about what had actually happened in those earlier times.

And they, in a way, got on Chadwick Boseman's case. He was magnificent in the way he dealt with it. He was just enough older than they were, and had been through just enough of his own experiences as an actor and in his own life. That was the most heated anything got, that conversation. It was heated, and at the same time animated. There are still people who are very caught up in old ways of thinking about how the world should be. So I would say *42* is my favorite movie. (*laughter*) It's certainly the movie I'm proudest to be a part of.

I did *The Frontier*, a low-budget small film that premiered at South by Southwest last year, and made the festival circuit. It'll be on pay-for-play, and it's just me and two young people. One played my estranged son and the other a young gal who helped us reconnect. I had the lead; it was Matt Rabinowitz's first movie. He was co-writer and director. I've known him since he was in preschool with my daughter, India. I have a lot of affection for that film and for that experience, too.

Martirosyan: It's won a lot of awards, including one for you, for best actor. We're really looking forward to seeing it. ■ ABILITY

thefrontierpicture.com
lap.org





Nancy Villere - CrushPhotoStudios.com

LIA

Living an Operatic Story

It's true, in an instant, your life can change; an accident, a ruptured aneurysm, blunt trauma to the head, a cancer diagnosis. With Lia, it's been slow, temperamental and undiagnosed. Her blasé attitude makes one wonder if she's just used to her body's deception. She isn't, she just knows where her energy is best channeled—through music and laughter.

World-renowned soprano's Anna Nshanian, Luisa Tetrazzini, Montserrat Caballé, Maria Callas, now here comes Lia. This young diva is travelling, performing and sharing laughter along the way; the next two stages will light up Asia and Europe.

Talented actor, musician and good friend of *ABILITY*, Max Gail, turns the mic to become the interviewer and witness to Lia's infectious spirit.





Max Gail: So what's goin' on with you?

Lia: Plenty. Music—I have a few dates set up for performances, and in the meantime I'm working on new pieces and potential recordings, mostly classical pieces and arias.

Max: When did you know that you had the facility, appetite and the calling to sing that kind of music?

Lia: My father did a lot of theater and singing, and he's still quite the entertainer. My mom is a classical pianist, turned nursing professor, and now I've trapped her back into playing so she could accompany me, which is wonderful. And my grandmother was a theater and stage performer, grandfather writes poetry. A lot of it runs through my veins.

Max: Wow!

Lia: I was on stage quite a bit in my younger years, whether I was singing or theater. A lot of poetry writing. This classical chapter of my singing, began a few years ago, after I—I was on a hiatus from being happy. Then, I met Arman Nshanian, without whom my voice would have no armor. And his granmother, my maestro, soprano Anna Nshanian, she is my portal to all things classical. I have been, and as long as I can, will be singing.

When I'm singing, I don't recognize what my mouth is producing, it's euphoric.

Max: So it's just part of life for you, all of those things that were around you. That's wonderful.

Lia: I absolutely love and respect creativity, being able to explore various avenues.

Max: With this mysterious set of challenges you've been dealing with, have you found that you've had to reroute some things? Is the singing actually helpful with that? I sing kind of like a frog. I sing anyway. My twin sister studied voice for a long time, so I'm kind of in awe of what happens when people really create a song and people go, "Oh, wow!" But I am curious what that interaction is, if any.

Lia: Well, I can't run around the stage anymore. But, physically, what's been happening hasn't held me back from exploring music. I think it's more of what I've personally been allowing myself to be exposed to. I would have had challenges period, just a different set of. I think my perfectionist attitude is more of a challenge than anything physically that comes my way.

Max: Uh-huh.

Lia: The reality is when I'm singing, I can't focus on

anything but. It is unusually freeing.

Max: When I hear people sing in ways that if I try to do it when I'm sure nobody's listening, I end up kind of hurting myself.

(laughter)

But the sense of it is of connecting with anyone who can hear it. It's soaring in space, in a way.

Lia: That's a good word to use. You're definitely connecting and communicating on another level. And people feel it in different ways. If not audibly, through vibrations. My dear friend and comedic hoot, Kathy Buckley, was explaining to me the feeling of music through vibrations and frequencies. Music has a direct connection to your soul.

Max: It seems to me it's essential. The birds sing, the whales sing. Humans, when someone makes a sound, whether you're hearing Ray Charles or Liberace or whatever, it's like you feel that vibration in your own body. I don't know another word to use, but when I'm touched my music, it's a healing.

Lia: There's a lot of studies around music, healing and being able to communicate in ways you might not have the ability to at that moment but once there's music, things change.

We've been looking at music and memory. There have been studies with Alzheimer's and dementia patients and the power of music, tapping into emotion and memory.

Max: Isn't that amazing?

Lia: It is absolutely amazing.

Max: There are people who are totally withdrawn and someone starts singing to them, and they come alive and will remember lyrics to songs when they can't remember their name. What I know so far, Lia, what I think so far is, there's more mystery to what's going on with you than answers.

Lia: Yes.

Max: And maybe you could bring me up to speed with that, of what actually it is that you're dealing with in some kind of way that the medical folks have been able to identify.

Lia: Sure. I'll go back a few years. Growing up my health was smooth sailing. At about nine and a half years old, I began experiencing weakness in my legs. And unpleasant, excruciating pain in my legs. I started tripping quite a bit. This was around the time when I was in acting classes preparing head shots, going on auditions and starting my career as becoming a young actress. My goal was to be on the Disney Channel. Oh, how I dreamt of being on Disney.

I couldn't look up at people any more, I would lose my balance. I became really uncomfortable and off-balance as I walked. Leg cramps, twisting my ankles, toes would frequently cramp. I would get a lot of migraines, still do, not as often but painful nonetheless. Over the years, we've seen specialist after specialist in countries like Russia, and of course the best of the best here, UCLA, etc. Lots of tests, lots of guesses. It's very similar to—it mimics a lot of different types of diseases, like Guillain–Barré, Lyme disease, fibromyalgia muscular dystrophy.

Over the years my legs started getting weaker and weaker, leading to significant atrophy. I experienced the death of 10 toes and two feet—they're there, I just can't move them. At about 18-ish my hands joined the party. They started atrophying a bit. That was gradual. There was never a consistent progression or typical journey of whatever is going on. The beast of the disease is doing what it wants, when it wants.

It was a blast adding this to my awkward teenage years. You never really get used to it, just deal with whatever comes, as it comes.

I took part in something interesting recently, called trio sequencing. It's relatively new, maybe just a couple years old. Exome sequencing is a technique that shows a detailed view of an individual's DNA. What the "trio" means is that they took both mine and each of my parents' blood to check and see if there are certain mutations that stand out on the genome.

I have less than a month to know the outcome. That would be the latest news in my medical journey. The results will determine what I do next, whether it be a diagnosis or a worthwhile clinical trial.

Max: I would imagine that to have some kind of explanation would be meaningful, even if the next step was back to head-scratching, to have some kind of sense of where it's—some kind of explanation.

Lia: Perhaps, but I've faced my fair share of—doctors haven't been shy with trying to diagnose me with whatever comes to mind.

Max: Aha! So you've had plenty of people come up with their idea of what's going on?

Lia: I've had three or four buckets full of diagnoses. Can't blame them for trying. I've had interesting experiences. One of the first people I saw, when I was about 10, he diagnosed me as having Charcot-Marie-Tooth, which is a pretty common disease with the symptoms that I've had. He, prior to questions or tests, looked at me and said





At the recording studio with world-renowned soprano, Anna Nshanian

I have this. He suggested I learn how to fish, because I would be in a wheelchair within months, and I could go fishing with my grandfather. His hopes and aspirations for what my life would have been didn't come true. I don't fish well.

Max: (laughs)

Lia: We tried to find him a few years later and have a pretty conversation. He was off fishing.

(laughter)

So, I've had some interesting experiences growing up and built quite a tough exterior for myself.

Max: Yeah, for some reason I thought this was all later-onset. I didn't realize that this had been going on for so long.

Lia: It's dragged on. It started off relatively early, surprisingly so, and it just lagged on over the years. I recently went to a world-renowned South Korean hospital while attending the World Wide Web conference. On Thursdays they happened to have a free clinic of seeing those with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). It was one of their busiest days, but we didn't know this until later. Not knowing more than two words of Korean, navigating to the hospital was hilarious.

We had help from kind strangers along the way. Such a friendly culture. Anyway, we get to the hospital, we explain our situation to four different people who had little to no English-speaking capabilities. They pointed us in the direction of one of the specialists, and we said, "We understand that it's busy," because they tried to explain that to us, but they didn't need to, there were so many people there. We said we'd just wait, and if they had a minute, we'd speak to them then.

One of the specialists finally had a little window, or made one for us. We went to his office, and spend quite a bit of time. He spoke English fluently. Such a pleasant individual. He questioned my experiences, symptoms, drew a little diagram explaining ALS and expanding on the similarities that I may have to it.

I'd explain a scenario and he'd respond with, "Wait a minute, that's weird." After about maybe 15-20 minutes of explaining that I might have ALS, going back and forth, drawing diagrams; I mentioned my sensory involvement. He then he nixed the whole idea of my having ALS. And ended with, "I just don't know what's going on."

(laughter)

He was dumbfounded. The moral of the story is that that's the story of my life. Korea is doing a lot of

research for individuals who have ALS, stem cell research—they're making strides.

Max: It leaves that possibility out there, if you stay on that path of finding some kind of explanation and way of reversing things, and at the same time you're finding out the possibility creatively of being able to fulfill yourself and your possibilities creatively with the singing.

Lia: For now, based on my symptoms, the verbiage we use is motor sensory peripheral neuropathy, which basically means that I have trouble with the movement and feeling of my lower extremities.

I had a muscle biopsy done several years ago that determined there had been generation and regeneration of my myelin sheaths, which are what cover the neurons. This is an important factor in the nervous system functiontioning properly.

Max: Ah!

Lia: We see pieces, but not enough to put the puzzle together.

Max: Wow. Are you taking anything for the pain or any of your symtoms?

Lia: I'm looking into a drug that is being used for individuals with multiple sclerosis (MS), called AMPYRA, it helps with gait. The good thing is, within months, it either works or not. I'm having a big issue with the insurance company not covering it because I don't have an exact MS diagnoses. Even though it may help.

I'm threatening to pay out of pocket. They don't want my money. Propaganda.

*Max: (*laughs*) Have you heard of anybody or met anybody who seems to be similar enough to feel like you know might be dealing with the same thing?*

Lia: When we we went to the Middle East, a mutual friend introduced us to an aspiring Palestinian model. Prior to going into the restaurant where we were going to meet, I noticed this young lady walking in. Arm in arm, for support, with another person. She had an almost identical gait as me. My initial reaction was, "Oh, hell no!"

(*laughter*)

That was a fun memory.

Max: So now you're getting ready to go to China and sing?

Lia: Yes sir.

Max: That's really exciting. Have you found an accompanist, got that part of it worked out?

Lia: I have a couple of pieces that I'll be using recorded accompaniment, courtesy of my mother.

Max: That must have been neat with your mom.

Lia: She's a woman of many talents.

Max: Very cool.

Lia: It's quite an experience.

Max: That must be very cool for her, too, for the two of you.

Lia: Sometimes she'll get lost in my singing and stop playing.

(laughter)

It's hilarious. She says, "I'm sorry, I just got so into what you were doing!" I told her she can't be doing that when we're onstage. It's wonderful to be able to share this with her.

Max: I think that is all really nice. What about your poetry? What is your poetry to you?
Lia: I think poetry is a creative combination of words that have come together like never before. I use poetry as a way of getting things out of my mind and onto the piece of paper. Performing them is another exciting art form.

Max: When you say perform them, you mean you recite them? Does music come into that?

Lia: Yes, I do mean reciting. The combination of music and poetry is something I'm working on. My one-woman show will have plenty of this woven into it.

Max: Those two have a natural fit. Things want to come off the page once they're on the page.

Lia: That's a nice way to put it.

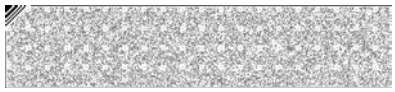
Max: Even when we speak, there's music.

Lia: The sposung word.

(laughter)

Trademark.

*Max: Yeah (*laughs*). There's melody and rhythm and all the things that make music, music. The best songs are where the melody helps to bring out what's being expressed. That opens up a wonderful big open door. Can you tell me more about your one-woman show?*





Nancy Villere - CrushPhotoStudios.com

I only eat red peanut M&M's, please seperate them

Lia: Almost.

(laughter)

Max: Where are you originally from, Lia?

Lia: Armenia.

Max: Do you still go back there?

Lia: I go back as frequently as I can, but I haven't been able to for atleast two summers. I have a sense of calmness when I'm there.

Max: I didn't know you were born there. You came here at an early age?

Lia: Yes, I was about three. I sent for my family when I settled in.

(laughter)

Max: Where in the States did you arrive?

Lia: Exactly where I am now, Glendale. It's known to have the biggest population of Armenians outside of Armenia. That's where I am.

*Max: I dated an Armenian girl back in Detroit, when I was in college, and I remember going to a family gathering. I'm a Midwestern guy, I kind of thought—it was the first time I ever experienced a whole bunch of people who were checking me out, and I was coming out sort of okay with them, but at the same time, I knew it would be a really big deal to go any further with that relationship. (*laughs*)*

Lia: Good call.

Max: I didn't know how close everyone was. It opened me up to ways people can be connected as family. I just didn't have that sensibility. Armenians have had a very particular journey in the last century or so.

Lia: Yes. This year will mark the 100th anniversary since the Armenian genocide that occurred in 1915.

Max: Yeah. It's amazing.

Lia: Now we have George Clooney and his incredibly intelligent wife, Amal Clooney, who are fighting for human rights and recognizinition of the genocide. The goal is reconizing and preventing these atrocities from happening.

Max: We have to keep hoping for the best. Before we go, what's your favorite color?

Lia: Let's say, periwinkle! ■ ABILITY

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The Friendship Behind the Special Olympics Team & USA Sailing Team

By cracking jokes and having fun, Michael Crofton and John Kirkland work to keep their competitive spirits in check.

When Michael Crofton and John Kirkland compete in the Special Olympics World Games as members of the Special Olympics Team USA sailing team this summer, there will be plenty of challenges on the horizon.

This will be their first World Games as a team, and their first time to Los Angeles. While they have sailed in the ocean, they've never sailed in the Pacific. And although they usually steer a catamaran on a lake in their home state of Georgia, the World Games requires the use of a boat with a single hull.

But they probably have a joke for all of that.

"We always want to do our best, but we don't want to let the tension build up to where it's overwhelming," Kirkland said.

Kirkland, 28, and Crofton, 33, share an easygoing attitude that works well with the unpredictability of the wind. When they meet with about a dozen other athletes and Unified partners on Lake Tobesofkee in Macon for practice, there are times when the wind is on their side. In those cases, Crofton is at the front of the boat controlling the jib sail as Kirkland steers and helms the main sail. Both men listen attentively to the other in order to coordinate their speed and direction. When the air is still, and there are no ripples on the water, that's when the mood changes from serious to lighthearted.

"If there's a lot of wind, you get to have a blast and sail —sail fast, and sail well. If there's not that much wind, then you get to hang out and talk," Kirkland said.

Discussions can vary from motorcycles and cars to punch lines with animal sounds. There are also the many times they've jokingly recreated the famous Titanic scene by yelling out, "I'm flying!" with their arms outstretched. According to their assistant coach, Debbie Parrish, it's this type of brotherly friendship that makes their teamwork so effective.

"John is a really nice guy, he's really awesome. He learned sailing from me," Crofton said, laughing.

Crofton has been involved with Special Olympics since he was three-years-old, and he's competed as an athlete in events ranging from swimming and boxing to bowling and tennis. He learned how to sail five years ago, and considers this sport to be his favorite. His Unified partner (a teammate without intellectual disability) became a volunteer in 2013, after he and some friends saw the sailboats on Lake Tobesofkee and he was curious enough to ask about them. So, maybe Crofton's joke about teaching Kirkland isn't too far off.

"I just call it a win-win situation. I get to learn how to sail, which is pretty cool, and I also get to help out with Special Olympics," Kirkland said. "It's a good opportunity to meet people. Sometimes you feel like you're getting more out of hanging out with all the Special Olympics athletes."



L-R: Kirkland & Crofton having good times with an eye on the win!

When they speak about the upcoming World Games, Kirkland and Crofton list their goals in relation to the other person's happiness. Crofton is excited to make new friends, but he also wants his teammate to have fun. Kirkland said that he's working hard to make sure that Crofton has a lifelong memory. Both joke about what it would be like to win.

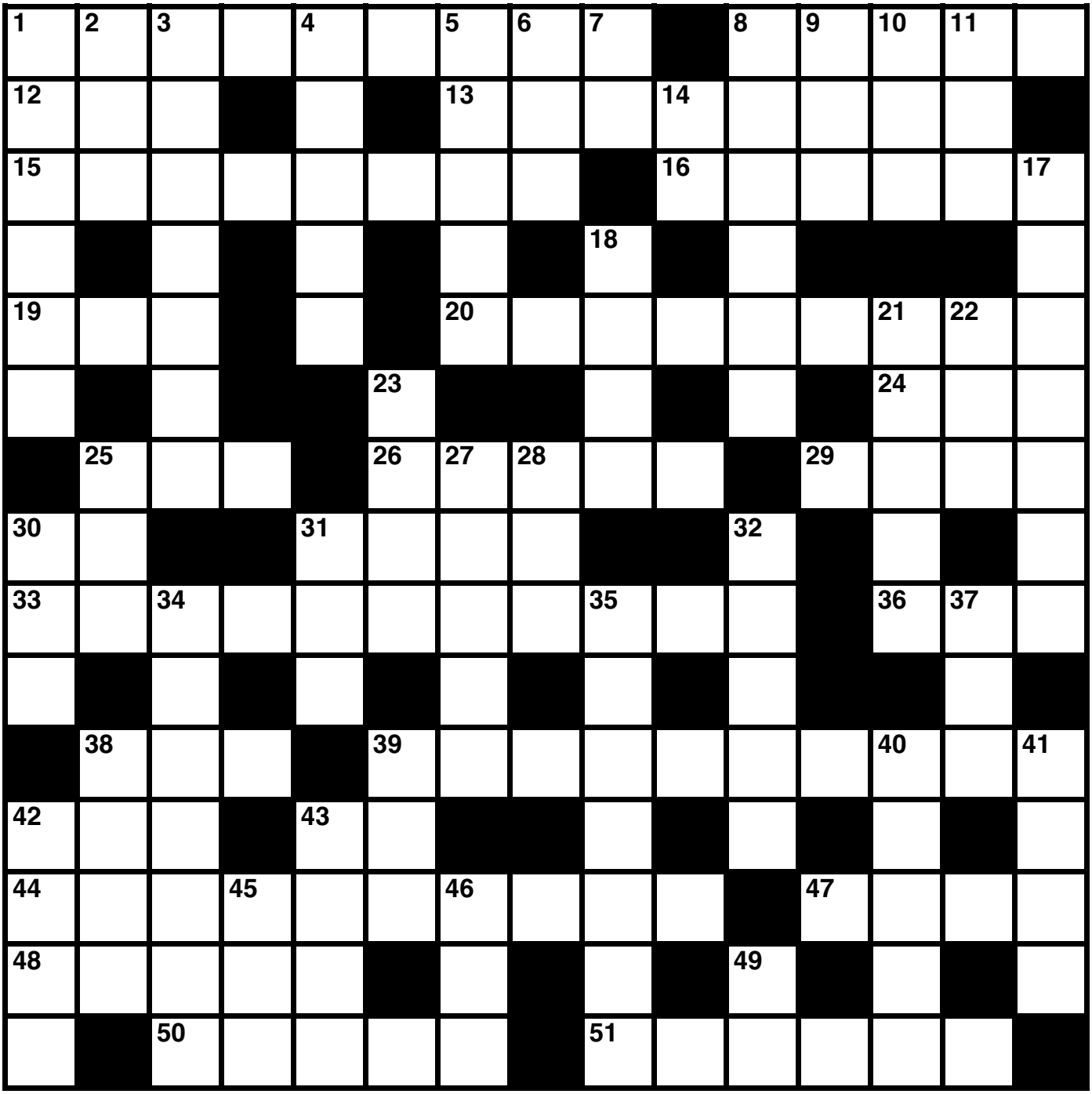
"We do it together. That's what a team is all about," Crofton said.

For more information about the 2015 Special Olympics World Games, visit LA2015.org and on social with #ReachUpLA on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Tune in to watch the 2015 Special Olympics World Games on ESPN on July 25th.

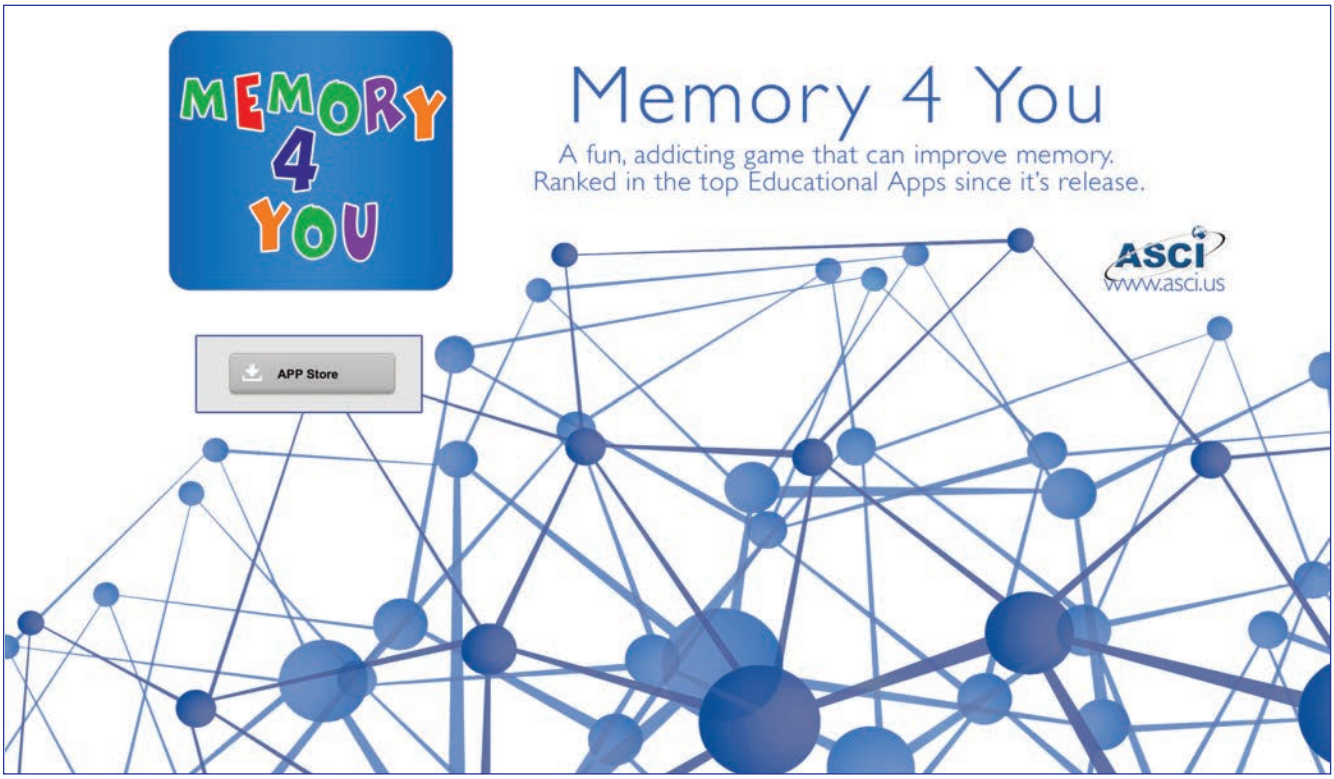
Visit PlayUnified.org to get involved with the Special Olympics Unified Sports Movement. To learn more and follow the progress of Special Olympics Team USA, visit SpecialOlympicsTeamUSA.org, and on social: Facebook FB.com/SOTeamUSA, Twitter @SOTeamUSA, Instagram @SOTeamUSA. ■ ABILITY

by Kelly Dawson

ABILITY's



Crossword Puzzle



ACROSS

1 He's an inspiration in China with the school he started for blind kids (2 words)
8 One of the greatest stand-up comedians of all time who courageously battled MS, Richard ____
12 Patriotic chant
13 Having lost one's parents, like Nelson Mandela and Louis Armstrong
15 He won an Oscar for his portrayal of Stephen Hawking, Eddie ____
16 Author of "Out of my Mind" - a book about a brilliant girl who cannot speak or write, Sharon ___
19 Sweetie pie
20 Achieved your goal
24 Inexperienced
25 ___-do attitude
26 Excel
29 Life saver
30 Twin cities state
31 Equitable
33 Book about courage and overcoming huge barriers by Nick Vujicic
36 Prefix with night and day
38 Canadian famous for his "Marathon of Hope"
39 Location of the 2015 Special Olympics
42 "Can't Help Lovin' ___ Man"
43 Wide shoe fitting
44 Costa Rica VP campaigning for rights for people with disabilities (last name)
47 Apple and volcano
48 Christopher who wrote "Still Me"
50 Brightman or McLachlan
51 He won through non-violent protest

DOWN

1 "Beverly Hills Cop" star, Eddie
2 Function
3 'Material Girl' singer supports "Raising Malawi"
4 Civil rights organization, abbr.
5 Tom or Tommy Lee
6 Wrath
7 Old vinyl record
8 UNICEF ambassador "Sex and the City" (Jessica-____)
9 Single-helix molecule
10 Informal assent
11 Keats' forte
14 Type of TV
17 Tree that is one of the oldest living things
18 Legend
21 Martin Luther King spoke about his
22 Musical perception
23 Do it now!
25 News outlet
27 In the know (2 words)
28 Savings alternative
30 Kind of wrestling
31 "House of Sand and ___"
32 Type of salad
34 Calms
35 With a huge smile on one's face
37 Cool sculpture medium
38 Meet head on
39 Author Harper ___
40 Enjoy a joke
41 Partner of sink
42 "Wild" actress campaigns for Down Syndrome, Laura ____
43 ''The Greatest Story ___ Told''
45 Desperate Housewives supports Make-A-Wish ___ Longoria
46 The old college cheer
49 Broadcasting

answers on page 62

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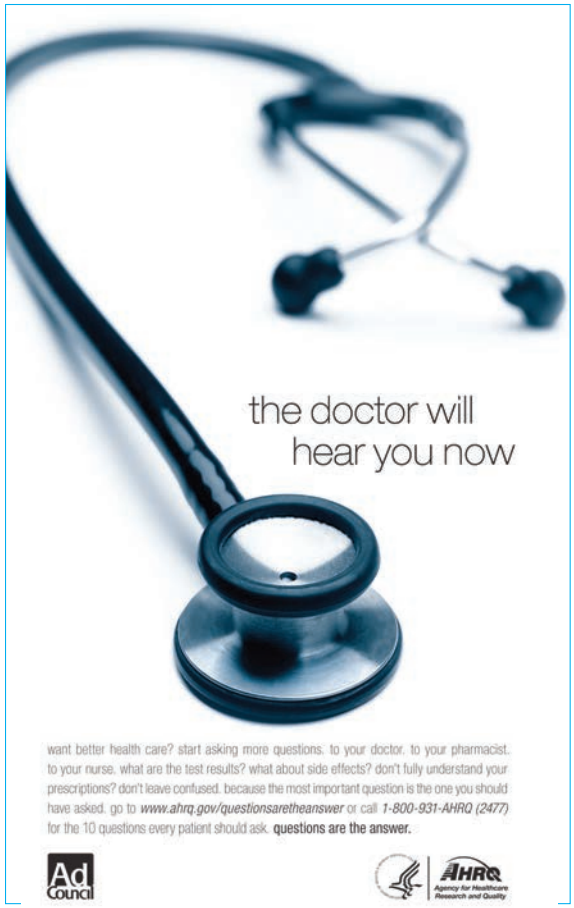
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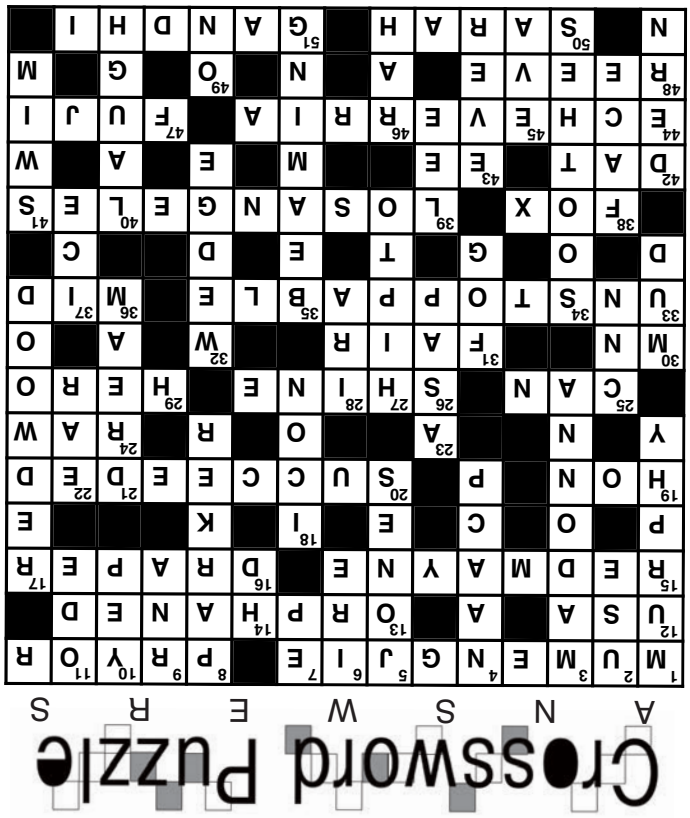
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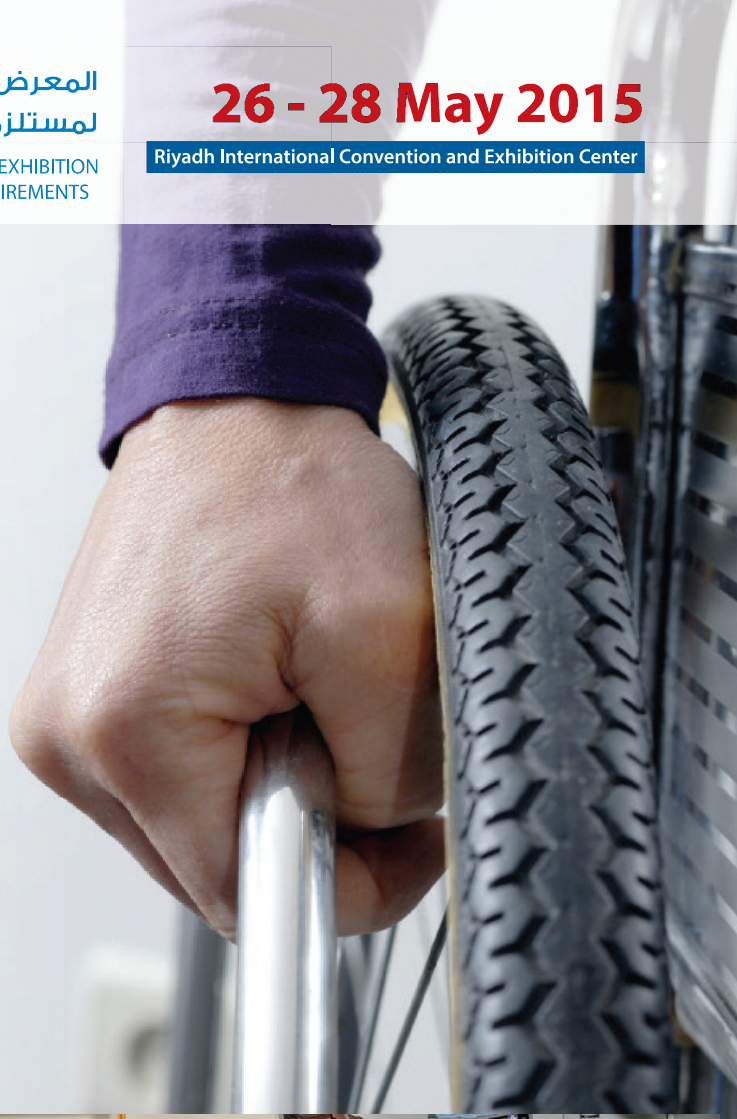
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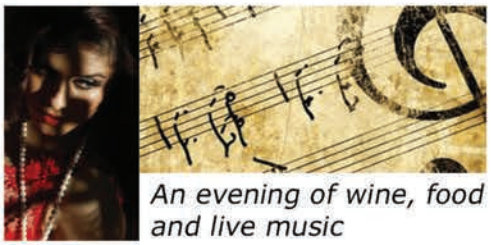












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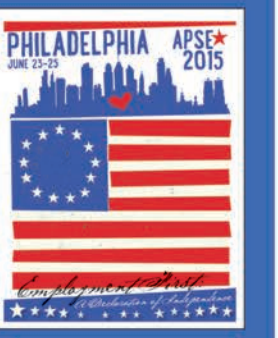
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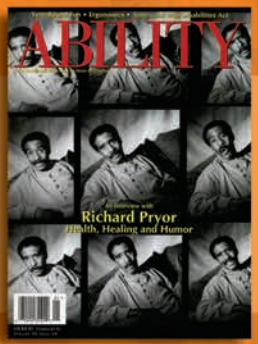
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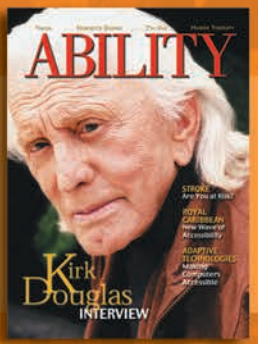
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