

The View From Here
By: Justine Chichester

"The disability is not the problem. The accessibility is the problem." - Mohamed Jemni (TEDX 2013)

Every time I leave my house these days, I worry about accessibility wherever I go. Specifically, I stress a lot over parking. Now that I have mastered the art of driving using hand controls (and feel comfortable doing it); now that I can break down my wheelchair and put it in the car on my own (in fact, I insist on doing it by myself when I'm with others who offer to help....I've got the whole process down to about 2 minutes flat); now that I have gotten over the stigma of being out in public places on my own in a wheelchair; I am still constantly plagued with the fear of whether or not there will be adequate parking for me wherever I go. Usually...there's not.

What people who are not wheelchair users don't understand, and will probably never understand, is that if there is not an available accessible parking spot at my destination, I can't get out of the car. It's that simple. I won't be able to go inside. I'll have to leave. There can be plenty of other available spots, but I can't park there because there isn't enough space to get my wheelchair out of the car. If I take up two spaces, park in between the lines, as has been suggested by many, I run the risk of someone parking up so close next to me that I won't be able to get back in my car.

One of my many, many recent stories about my parking woes was just two weeks ago, my husband and I were attending an event on South Beach. We pulled in to a parking garage on Collins Avenue near the Lowe's Hotel. To my surprise, the entire first floor of the garage was designated accessible parking. We drove through and every, single one of the accessible spots was taken. So, I continued to drive up each level, having to pass up many other open spots because there was not enough room for me to get my wheelchair out of the car if I parked there. Ultimately, multiple stories of parking, nothing available for me.

I'm not about to get into the argument of how many people fraudulently use disabled parking placards. I do know that when I arrive at a parking garage or a parking lot and every, single accessible parking space is occupied, and people are jumping in and out of their cars, there has got to be some fraudsters around using disabled parking placards when they really do not have a disability. I am also well aware that "not all disabilities are visible." However, if you are able to get out of your car and walk into the bank or the grocery store or wherever you are going, you could have done that from the open one or two parking spaces away, instead of using up that accessible parking space. I can't do that. I don't have the option of choosing a different space. That option was taken from me the moment I became a wheelchair user.

So, I have a solution. For every few accessible parking spaces in a parking lot, at least one space should be designated "for wheelchair users only." This small change would mean the difference between me being able to get to my destination and actually being able to go inside or having to leave just because there was not an available parking space for me to park and take my wheelchair out of the car. Most of all, it would provide peace of mind to those of us who already have to tackle so much just to get to where we're going.