

## Winter Realities

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### *Is it Spring Yet?!?*



*Icy wheelchair-accessible ramp at Lanny's house  
(Jan. 2009).*

Brrr.... Sitting inside with a warm blanket, hot chocolate and a good book, it is easy to forget about the realities of the frigid tundra outside.

For those of us with mobility issues, winter weather can challenge us more than any other season of the year. Our determination to be as independent as possible sometimes becomes an obstacle in itself. We go to school, to work and to the grocery just like anyone else, with one major difference. Each time we venture out into the cold, snow and ice, we are at greater risk of falling, breaking bones and getting frostbite.

It may take longer to get to the car or van maneuvering through an obstacle course of snow, ice, salt and cinder, all of which can stick to shoes, wheels and crutch tips. Getting to the vehicle is just half the battle. We now have to manage scraping snow and ice from the windshield before we can get on our way. Try that while sitting in a wheelchair or on a scooter. A lucky few of us may have a dependable family member or neighbor who is willing to assist with this wintertime chore. Many of us must resort to the use of the old standby, the defroster, to clear the windshield, eventually.

Tires are always an issue when it comes to winter weather, whether they are on cars, trucks, vans, wheelchairs or scooters. Wheelchair tires and rims often get packed with snow and cause our hands to freeze. Wearing gloves often weaken one's handgrip and become wet and frozen. Gloved or not, frostbite is always a danger when outside for an extended period. For wheelchair users, the ability to overcome snow-packed sidewalks and plow through snowdrifts depend largely on wheelchair tire type and the upper body strength of the individual.

Scooters and power-chairs are notorious for getting stuck on any surface rougher than the finest Mall flooring. A snow-covered sidewalk is out of the question for these mobility devices. Crutch and cane tips may break through the snow while our feet remain above the snow pack sending us face-first into the realities of winter. In my case, once I am down, I am completely dependent on the generosity of others to resurrect me before I can continue my journey.

To add insult to injury, strong winds often turn an otherwise serene winter adventure into a major obstacle course. Despite fighting with all your might against it, the wind will suddenly stop altogether or shift directions and suddenly you're at the mercy of gravity...again!

Wheels are wheels whether on a vehicle, wheelchair or scooter, and wind can redirect your attention in an instant by whipping you into a wall, handrail or a parked car. It doesn't matter if you're facing it or if it's at your back.

Once you finally reach your car, you may find yourself locked out, even with your key in hand. The wind can hold any door closed better than the most expensive deadbolt. If you do manage to get the door open, the wind may slam it shut again before you can make any move to gain entry.

If you're inside the car trying to get out, you do have one advantage. You can park in the opposite direction. However, this too has its drawbacks. You may not be able to get the door closed! Either way, sustained high winds can hold you hostage for hours.

Once we are finally in the car, truck or van we are not apt to go back indoors and wait while the vehicle warms up. We remain inside shivering until the defroster has done its work and the heater has thawed our frozen digits.

Even if all goes well with getting the vehicle scraped and we finally get inside the vehicle, we still must be ready to tackle the parking lots with the limited accessible parking spaces. Many times these designated spaces are filled with a mountain of snow from recent attempts at snow removal. Even if the parking spaces are snow free, the spaces between them are often ice packed at the very spot where you open the door causing you to take two spaces to straddle the netherworld and risk getting a parking ticket.

For all those considerate folks who have offered assistance during this extraordinary winter, thank you! Every little act of kindness from carrying groceries to the car to shoveling snow from my sidewalk reduces my risk of having a major medical event take place. I do not need to prove my independence during record-setting winter storms. My independent spirit drives me to be as independent as possible, but my common sense usually keeps me from recklessly risking life and limb to prove I can do it myself.

I appreciate every "Can I help you?" and "Need some help?" It makes both of us feel better. You feel good because you were able to help someone and I feel good because someone cared enough to ask if I needed help. That's a win-win situation to me.

Remember, inclusion is an attitude, so keep it positive!