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Happenstance



happens

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Who's Your Hero?

From shopping to being a single mom, this advocate's busy life is an inspiration

I was in the grocery store engaged in the fine art of expiration date examination, when I noticed a presence coming up behind me. I quickly moved my overflowing basket so it didn't block the aisle—an infraction I have been known to grumble about. I mumbled a vague apology into the air around me. To my surprise a man, whom I had never met, grabbed my hand and began pumping my arm with gusto.

"Thank you," he said, pumping away. "Thank you for being an inspiration."

At first I thought he must be overwhelmed with gratitude because I moved my basket and allowed him access to the dairy shelves. Then he said, "It's so awesome that you are here and with no assistance!" His voice was filled with incredulity; disbelief that I would be grocery shopping by myself. Frankly grocery shopping by myself has its perks. It's always cheaper and almost always healthier—as in food choices—when my kids aren't with me.

I thought, "I am over fifty and have had a driver's license since I was fifteen years old." Given the fact that I graduated from my mother, Fran Charlton's school of etiquette with flying colors, I merely smiled and thanked him for his generous words.

As I was heading toward the produce section, I began to snicker a little. I have a friend, who like me, is a bi-lateral below-the-knee amputee. He and I often play the game of, "Who inspires whom the most." Generally I win, because I'm missing one more body part than he is, but as I got to thinking about this compliment delivered next to the low-fat milk, I began to scold myself for being insensitive.

"Good for him for having the courage to approach me in the first place!" I thought.

As I was pushing my basket, one-handed and on prosthetic legs, I began to take stock of what I must look like to the average person. "Not only that," again in my thoughts, "You alone know what it has taken to get you to this point."

Being in this exclusive club of limb loss, I know intimately what the day to day feels like, what all it entails. The first thing I do every morning when I get up, is put on my

glasses, and then reach for my legs. Almost always I'm running the "beat the bladder to the bathroom" race, while limping along, trying to get settled down into each prosthesis. No matter what the day holds for me, no matter how sore or tired my residual limbs are from the day before, the prostheses go on. They are my friends as well as my nemeses, but they are necessary to my independent way of living.

It takes a certain amount of courage to strap those legs on, when at the start of the day soreness and fatigue are already issues. It takes a certain ability and capability to not allow hardship to overrule the decision to go grocery shopping. As I think about that stranger in the grocery store I wonder if he was really so far off of the mark. I certainly don't think of myself as courageous for going to the grocery store alone, or doing anything by myself, for that matter.

I don't think of myself as an inspiration while squeezing cantaloupes or checking the shelf life on a gallon of milk. I don't think about what I look like when I'm out in the public eye, doing my errands and chores—doing the same things everyone else does, but I live in this body every day, every moment of my life. I'm used to putting one fake foot in front of the other to accomplish my goals for the day, whether placing that foot feels good or not. I'm out there with everyone else, doing the best I can.

It was a good day for me that day in the grocery store. I was concentrating more on the purchase of food than I was on the comfort level of my prostheses. I'm sure that ease and comfort translated as courage and strength to my benevolent stranger. That's not such a bad way to be viewed. I rarely sit and contemplate about how courageous or inspirational I am, but I recognize those attributes and use them when I need them most. I recognize that others think of me as courageous and inspirational and some even see me a veritable hero.



Cindy Charlton

"It takes a certain amount of courage to strap those legs on, when at the start of the day soreness and fatigue are already issues."

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Hero

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I understand that being my own inspiration—my own hero—is what gets me up each and every morning regardless of what hurts. It's always easier to pull the covers over your head, and hope for a better pain free day. When you are your own hero, pulling the covers over your head simply isn't an option.

The next time someone commends me on how inspirational I am, or thanks me for exhibiting what they perceive as courageous behavior, I will simply say "You're welcome," and truly mean it.

—Cindy Charlton is a single mom with two active teenage sons. She serves on the Board of Advisors for the Southwest YMCA and is a member of the Colorado

Coalition of Working Amputees, (CCWA). She helped pass Colorado's 'Prosthetic Parity Bill (HB1478),' in 2000, and is working with the CCWA to pass the bill on a national level. Cindy is a certified Peer Counselor, helping people adjust to living with limb loss. She is a published columnist for inMotion magazine, has just finished writing her first children's book, and is working on her memoirs.