

Disability Accessibility Is About Respect

A Q&A with ACA's primary accessibility consultant for this month's ACA Conference & Expo.

By **Melanie Padgett Powers**



ROSEMARIE ROSSETTI, PHD, is an internationally known speaker, writer and consultant. In 1998, she was crushed by a tree and was paralyzed from the waist down with a spinal cord injury. She has been using a wheelchair ever since. Rossetti is working with ACA as the primary accessibility consultant for this month's ACA Conference & Expo, helping to ensure accessibility throughout the event for people with disabilities. ACA has reviewed and upgraded processes from registration

to in-person arrangements. Rossetti also trained ACA staff on disability etiquette and how to best communicate about accommodations before and during the meeting. The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What do you want people to think about when it comes to accessibility?

A: Disability comes in many forms. It can be a mobility challenge in terms of walking or climbing steps. It could be a cognitive challenge in terms of memory recall or intellectual ability. It could be a sensory disability in terms of sight, vision or hearing. Often, when a person thinks of accessibility, they're thinking of accommodating people in wheelchairs, but that's just one component of disability and inclusion. We need to think of the intellectual, the cognitive, the hearing and the sight in addition to mobility.

One in four people has a disability – that's 70 million people in the U.S. So we need to broaden our thoughts about what we need to do. Often, people think only of what is visible as a disability, but there are so many invisible disabilities – or not apparent disabilities. In addition, some people have temporary disabilities. They may have slipped and fallen; then they're on crutches or in a wheelchair for a while. That is

a wake-up call for people when they realize how difficult it is to be mobile with a temporary disability.

Q: Why is accessibility important for counselors to think about?

A: It's a business imperative. Do counselors need to serve more people? Do they want to keep expanding their business? Also, there's a legal compliance; they must be accessible based on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) because they serve the public. However, the business imperative is the stronger case. You can expand your business tremendously – word will get out in the disability community that you have an office that is serving people with disabilities well and that you have an attitude to ensure that you're accommodating people and taking care of their needs.

Q: How can counselors better plan for accessibility in their practices?

A: In terms of marketing, are they showcasing photos of their office and showing accessibility features? They can include testimonials from clients with disabilities, showcasing that they have been respected and served equally. They may be able to improve their facility. Counselors also need to look at parking. Many people need accessible parking, and that may mean a van with a ramp on the side. If counselors have room for only one

parking space, my recommendation is to make that van-accessible.

Next, look at the path of travel once someone gets out of their vehicle. How easy will it be for them if they're in a manual wheelchair or a walker to get into your office? Is there a step or a curb? Are plants in the way that need to be removed? Is the path flat? Is the surface concrete or asphalt, rather than dirt, rocks, bricks or cobblestones?

Now we're getting up to the door. Is the door wide enough? Is it a double door? Is there 32 inches of clear space when that door is totally open? And is that door automated so that someone can push a button or wave their hand?

Is the office on another floor? Then there must be an elevator that's big enough to accommodate a person to get to your office. Then, once they get to your office, what about your office door? I recommend a 36-inch-wide door. It should be easy to open and lightweight; that is, the door pressure should be so light you can open it with just two fingers if the door is not already automated.

Q: Shouldn't buildings already be ADA-compliant?

A: Yes, a public building definitely needs to be compliant, but has it been? Are contractors really doing what's necessary? As I visit a lot of commercial sites, and as I review these types of buildings, they're not all in compliance. If you can't open a door because the door pressure is too hard, that's not in ADA compliance. The other area is the restrooms. I found some situations in which restrooms are not very accessible, and the door for the accessible stall swings inside the stall, making it a very tight fit to get into that stall and

close that door properly. ADA compliance isn't guaranteed just because you're in a public building. Some of them were just designed improperly.

Q: You and your husband built a home that is a Universal Design Living Laboratory that you allow people to tour and learn from. How did that come about?

A: When I was injured and came home from the hospital in the summer of '98, I had a rude awakening to realize there was no way into my home from a wheelchair. In the beginning, my husband had to lift me in the wheelchair up several steps to get into the front door. Later, neighbors and friends built a wooden ramp so at least someone could push me into the front door. But it was not independent; it was like the luge in the Winter Olympics – too steep. Later, we installed an electric vertical platform and modified the porch so I could get in. That was the first obstacle: How do you get into your home?

Then, coming home in a rented wheelchair from the hospital and having to deal with carpet – there was no way I could roll myself. I was too weak. I was in a neck brace and body brace in a very large rented wheelchair, so I couldn't even roll on the carpet. The doors had to come off, and the furniture had to be removed from the bedroom. A hospital bed had to be brought into the bedroom. I couldn't shower independently. The shower door had to come off. We brought in a transfer shower bench, and I had to learn how to use a sliding transfer board to get out of bed, into the wheelchair, and transfer from the wheelchair to the shower bench. It was a real nightmare to realize the house we had built when we were first married was not going to work long-term.

So we designed a national demonstration home and garden, the Universal Design Living Laboratory, in Columbus, Ohio. It was a 10-year project. We had many volunteers and over 200 sponsors. We were the general contractors and builders and led the effort. It was a Herculean project. We've lived here now 12 years.

Q: What do you want people to take away from the living laboratory?

A: Borrow a few good ideas. This house, of course, is residential, but the features of universal design are universal. You can use a lot of universal design features throughout the house in any situation. We offer a virtual tour on our website. Counselors can see how we have made the approach to our house with a very gradual incline to get into the front door. The threshold is less than a half inch, and all the doors are 36 inches wide. They can see the door hardware has lever-style handles, see how easy it is to roll on the flooring and see the height and knee space of the counters, especially in the kitchen, laundry room and bathroom.

Q: Any final words for counselors?

A: If they're concerned about compliance and want to know what ADA requires, they can call a helpful 800 number or visit ada.gov. Don't think this is overwhelming. It is a matter of dignity. It is a matter of respect. Everyone's disability is unique, and often, you just need to ask, "Do you need any accommodations? What can I do to have you fully participate?" Then listen. ■

To learn more about Rosemarie Rossetti, visit RosemarieSpeaks.com and take a virtual tour of her home, the Universal Design Living Laboratory, at udll.com.