

2000: Bowling for the Blind

When I decided to donate some of my time to the Rose Resnick Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in San Francisco, little did I know that I would end up volunteering on a weekly bowling team for seniors. When I entered Japantown Bowl, the alleys where the club meets, the deafening crashes of wooden pins being leveled by roaring cannon balls almost made me turn around and leave.

Bowling? I asked myself. I'm too sensitive and genteel to frequent a bowling alley! The last time I went bowling, I was 16. I became furious with the friend I went with when he paid attention to other friends, ignoring me. I stomped home, only to realize when I got home that I was still wearing the bowling shoes I'd rented. I had to turn around and go back to the bowling alley to exchange shoes. My friend was still there bowling; he didn't even realize I'd been gone. Since then, I've always associated bowling with callused behavior. So, I was taken back by the big, welcoming smiles of the reception desk clerks, Jermery and Craig. They treated me like an honored guest.

The immensely popular activity director at the Lighthouse, Tony Fletcher, brings most of the bowlers by van from the Lighthouse at Van Ness, near Market. Other bowlers come on their own. I once asked Tony if he was growing a beard; he had more than just a five o'clock shadow. "No," he said. "Not shaving is an occupational reward. The blind don't care if you shave or not. They judge you by your character, not your looks." During these past two years of volunteering with the blind, I've found that to be true.

One of my jobs is to set up the railings that the blind use to help position themselves on the lane. The railings are kept in place with bowling balls that create a foundation that won't move if a bowler should yank on the rail by mistake. I carry 16-pound balls from the racks to the lanes for this purpose. Because I have a hand ailment that makes it impossible for me to hold anything as heavy as a bowling ball, I try to carry the balls in my arms. They feel like they're made of lead [Where do mothers get the strength to carry babies?] At first, our bowlers wanted me to join them in their game, but they understand my limitations and are considerate of my weak, swollen knuckles. They bowl for me; I vicariously enjoy their success at a game that I can't perform, telling them what pins are still standing and giving my suggestions on how they might position themselves to score.

Harry is totally blind and often reaches scores above 120. His highest score was in the 160s. He rarely sinks a gutter ball. If he knocks down nine of the ten pins, but leaves the number 6 pin standing, he'll respond with "Oh, the number 6 pin. I can hit that." And he usually does.

The blind follow the game of bowling through hearing. Despite the fact that all 20 lanes are often being used simultaneously, I've often heard one of them say something like, "That sounded like a strike," or "That sounded like three pins off the right side."

Anyone can get a strike sooner or later if they just bowl long enough, but to hit a spare takes concentration and physical control, especially when you're aiming at a target you've set in your mind without aid of visual precision.

Elva, who has since stopped bowling with us, is both deaf and blind. She would come with a full-time assistant. We communicated with Elva by holding her right index finger and writing block letters with it on the palm of her left hand. I also rubbed her back in a clockwise direction as my signature to her. She had some speech ability and would call my name. Once she got a strike and I jumped over two lanes to rub her back and hug her.

Don was scoring about 25-30 points a game for quite some time. Don's a folk dancer. He'd go up to the lane and fling the ball at the pins with the enthusiasm and abandon of Zorba breaking plates at a Greek wedding. With a few tips on body posture and a whole lot of concentration of his own, he is now able to focus his throws and has increased his score to an average of over 60 points a game. Recently, Don scored 113 points, his highest game ever. He rightfully asked for a printout of the game as a souvenir. The following game, he bowled a 97, his second highest score.

"Do you want a printout of this game, too?" I asked him.

"Na," he said. "Not good enough!"

Once Don got his index finger smashed between two balls in the ball rack, a hazard every bowler is familiar with.

"Ouch! That hurt," he exclaimed.

"I hope your injury doesn't stop you from reading." I commented in jest.

Our group is made up of seniors most of whom are on fixed incomes. They budget for each week's games. Japantown Bowl assists by giving us a discount. Regardless of official holidays, attendance is always outstanding.

I'm there to report scores, set up the rails, control the computer terminal, look for balls of particular weights and finger sizes and help out in any other ways I can. I see the courage and persistence of the blind. I share their success and disappointments. Someday, they'll get wise and start charging me for the privilege of refreshing my soul through them. But, until that day comes, I get to volunteer for free.