

“With a Little Help from My Friends” | BY LINDA K. OLSON

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for me.**

There’s supposed to be someone meeting us here. Can you see our name anywhere?” We slowly pushed through the crowd at the airport in Cusco, Peru, reading and then rereading each handheld sign before sighing with relief when we finally spotted our names on a sign held by a young man. Upon reaching him, he politely, yet firmly, muscled our luggage cart away from my husband Dave and out into the parking lot.

“¿Como está?” asked Dave in his newly minted Spanish.

“Uh, good...muy bien,” he mumbled. We

wove through the crowd as he steered us to a new-looking Sprinter. The door to the tall, sleek minibus gaped open, with three steep steps between the curb and interior. Our large, waterproof duffle bags seemed to jump into the van. One more large black suitcase and our carry-on backpacks completed the baggage of our small group.

The group consisted of Dave, myself, and our friend Yvonne. Friends from Montana, Carla and Roger, arrived later that afternoon, after hiking in Ecuador and visiting the Amazon, increasing our group to five people during this spring 2013 trip. What made Dave and I a little different from the other travelers was the fact that I am a triple amputee, having lost both my legs above the knee and my right arm at the shoulder more than thirty years ago. In Germany, our car had stalled on a railroad track and was hit by a train in 1979, two years after we were married. I was hospitalized in Salzburg, Austria. Since the accident, I have used bilateral above-knee prostheses with a quad cane to assist me, but now I also use a wheelchair much of the time. Despite all this, we raised a family, had successful careers, traveled the world, and spent extensive time roughing it in the wilderness, learning to be nearly totally self-sufficient. We figured we pretty much knew what we were doing.

Two men stood near the van to welcome us, smiling, but also intermittently betraying concern on their tanned, outdoorsy-looking faces. Jose appeared to be the older of the two. He hunched ever so slightly with his arms partly





Benjamin and Linda coming into Machu Picchu

crossed over his chest, his right hand absent-mindedly stroking his chin. Dark hair hid under a faded black baseball cap. With one knee akimbo, he appeared contemplative but slightly worried. Benjamin was lanky and taller, with curly black hair. His English was somewhat more halting than Jose's, and he tended to let Jose be the spokesperson. He was jauntier and seemed to be perpetually on the verge of laughing for no particular reason. They introduced our cart pusher, Claudio, to us as the driver.

A wheelchair suddenly appeared in front of us. I glanced at the wheelchair and then back to the three men, speechless.

Benjamin grinned at me, "We decided to make a wheelchair for you." The front wheels were medium-sized solid rubber, pink, blue, and yellow. "We replaced the front wheels with these that we took off a little kid's bicycle."

I stared at the wheelchair. The back tires were fat and sturdy. My jaw dropped when I saw the

hand brakes, which they had parasitized from another bike and mounted on the handles of the wheelchair. They turned the wheelchair around and sheepishly pointed to the seat belt they'd installed in it for "just in case..."

Still unsure how to react, I blurted out, "Are you kidding me? You put brakes on it? What made you think of that? That's a fabulous idea! I've been trying to figure out how to do that to my wheelchair!"

I should have known right then that this would be no ordinary trip. These guys wanted to put me in *their* wheelchair, the one they *made* for me. I was a little taken aback. I was already in my own wheelchair, and after using wheelchairs for thirty-four years, I considered myself to be an expert, unlike these guys, whom I suspected had never before dealt with a client in a wheelchair. At the very least, they had probably never seen a one-arm drive, manual wheelchair, like the one I use to propel myself independently.

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Into the labyrinth at Q'inqu

I snuck a surreptitious glance at these men, sensing a bond had already developed between us. If they had put this much effort into making a wheelchair, I wanted them to see the payoff. I wanted them to have a good time in return for their work.

So we had our first test of wills. Even though I was impressed with their invention, I was intent on maintaining my independence and not imposing on them.

"Dave can just carry me up the steps," I said, flashing a big smile to show that it was no problem.

I assumed Dave would do the typical "sling me up into the van." To show off, I often jokingly push my index finger into his chest, pretending to be pushing an elevator "Up" button, while at the same time asking an innocent bystander where *their* elevator is located. Meanwhile, I put my left arm around his neck while he hauls me up the stairs with me hanging in front of him. As he swings me up, my heels clunk down, and he levers me into an upright position. Our routine is so slick that it's done before anyone realizes what has happened.

But as I was getting ready to stand up, my three new best friends whipped out a new pair of short, expandable ramps, and laid them on the curb and up into the van doorway, making it quite clear that we would be using them to ascend into the van.

"When we knew you were coming, we removed the middle two rows of seats so we could put the wheel-

chair right here."

I saw that they had installed a wheelchair tie-down right next to the window, so I had the best view in the van. I smiled to hide my grimace while the three of them strained to push and pull me up the steep incline into the van. We started to careen off the ramps a couple of times, but with grunts and groans they righted me. They locked my wheelchair in place, but put "their" wheelchair right next to mine, and off we went. With a sidewise glance at the empty wheelchair, I found myself worrying that this might be a very long week if it was this much work to get around.

"Come on, let's do a little sightseeing before dinner," suggested Jose and Benjamin.

A late-afternoon sun shone between gigantic white life-like clouds and patches of brilliant, vivid blue sky. At an elevation of 11,200 feet, the hilly and narrow cobblestone streets present a challenge for everyone. Pedestrians walk slowly and rest often, breathing heavily to get as much air as possible into their oxygen-deprived lungs. Cars and tourist vans squeeze precariously through ancient, narrow cobblestone streets, no more than ten feet wide and occasionally flanked by skinny, two-foot-wide sidewalks.

"I think you should use *our* wheelchair this afternoon," Benjamin said.

"Hmm...why not just use mine? It's easier to get it in and out of the van, and I can push myself around in it," I spoke in my sweetest, leave-me-alone voice.

It wasn't their problem that I'm disabled. Dave and I choose to make these trips and give serious thought ahead of time as to how we are going to maneuver in tricky, usually wheelchair-unfriendly terrain and cities. We are a team, a well-oiled machine, and have practiced all over the world.

"Well, the places we are going this afternoon are pretty rough and I think we will need the bigger, fatter tires to make it safe and easier," said Benjamin.

"OK," I replied, agreeing to change wheelchairs. Over the next two hours, they proved time and time again to be right, as they hauled me up old stone steps and over bumpy, uneven cobblestones that had never seen the inside of an Americans with Disabilities Act rulebook, and never would.

As the equatorial sun slid behind the mountaintops, we knew that it was time to head back to the hotel. It was only four blocks away, but those four blocks were uphill and still at 11,200 feet elevation. Dave began hyperventi-

lating as he pushed the wheelchair. Benjamin appeared in front of us out of nowhere, unraveling a tangle of blue straps. Grateful for the excuse to stop, Dave watched in amazement as he realized that the blue straps unfolded into a harness that Benjamin attached to both sides of the front of the wheelchair. Unexpectedly, Benjamin started *pulling* my wheelchair with the homemade wheelchair harness. He looked back with a huge grin on his face and Dave immediately took the cue to start pushing again. We fairly flew up the bumpy, cobblestone street, which was so narrow that all the cars crept up the hill behind us till we reached our hotel.

Monday afternoon the van stopped near a large sign proclaiming our arrival at Q'inqu, an amazing labyrinth of steps, rooms, caves, seats, and designs carved out of a gigantic stone on a hillside. Impossibly narrow paths wound over, around, and under large stones. Jose was postulating that a large, flat rock slab was naturally cold enough to have probably been used in mummification ceremonies when Benjamin began wheeling me downhill under a narrow entry into an underground passage.

"Why don't you let me sit right here; I have a book with me," I mumbled, instinctively drawing my shoulders in and ducking my head.

"Uh, it's really no problem, we can do it," said Benjamin. My don't-let-me-be-a-problem instinct reared up.

"No, you don't understand," I retorted. "We do this all the time. I just sit in the shade and read my book and I'm really very happy. The last thing I want is for you guys to hurt yourselves trying to get me into all these places."

Jose interrupted his lecture to turn and grin at us. "It's really no problem. You see, we came out here last week and put one of the guys in the wheelchair to make sure it would fit and that we could get you through here. You're not nearly as heavy as he was, so today this was a piece of cake."

Unbelievable, yet true. They had spent the

last month inventing things and doing dry runs to ensure the success of our trip. I was beginning to realize that these were not your ordinary tour guides. They had been world-class kayakers/river guides/outdoor adventure guides for the past twenty years, and they were ready for a new challenge. We happened to come along at the right time. With the impetus of my impending visit, they had put themselves in someone else's shoes, in my case, a wheelchair, and tried to see how they could better this part of the world for disabled people. Their enthusiasm and creativity began to allow Dave and me to relinquish some of our tightly held control. I sensed this might be a win-win situation for all of us.

As Dave prepared for the four-day hike up the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu that evening, we unloaded the pack frame we've used for many years, the one that Dave carries me in when we go hiking. It has a twelve-by-twelve-inch canvas shelf that folds down from a backpack frame. I sit on the seat without prostheses, my chest up against Dave's back, and my body secured by wide straps over my shoulders. While it's a very efficient way to carry me, it is not easy to do because I weigh almost ninety pounds.



Wheelchair harness

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Coincidentally, Benjamin happened by our room and asked if he could see how we used the pack frame. Dave obliged him by setting me on the top of the dresser, slipping the pack over his shoulders, and leaning down slightly so I could “butt-walk” onto the seat. I gripped the frame tightly while he leaned forward to get the heavy load balanced on his back. He paced around the room a few times while explaining how he uses trekking poles and how he balances the load. Benjamin’s eyes got big. Finally, he couldn’t resist asking a question.

“Can I try that? That looks like it might work better than what we made.”

“Of course. Here, let me take it off.”

Dave set the pack on the dresser with me still in it, slipped out of the straps, and held it while Benjamin squatted slightly and shouldered the straps. As he hesitantly leaned forward, I slipped sideways, but hung on tightly so he wouldn’t notice our precariousness. He straightened up and took a few steps, jiggling the pack on his back to get more comfortable. He flashed another one of his now famous grins. “Wow,” he said, “this is great!”



Reunion after Dave's four-day hike

Dave, Carla, and Roger departed early the next day with Jose for their four-day hike, leaving Yvonne and me to tour the Sacred Valley and spend time in Cusco until Friday, when we took the train to Machu Picchu. Washington, a new guide joined us. “Washi,” an indigenous Peruvian, brought a new element to the crew; part tour guide, part shaman, part entrepreneur and law student.

“Hi, I’m Washi,” he said. I looked up at him from my wheelchair.

“Can you show me how to walk with you, and then can you show me how your wheelchair works? I’d like to practice with you before the van picks us up at 10 a.m.,” he continued.

With that introduction, Washi cycloned his way into our lives. Within minutes I’d shown him how to flex his elbow ninety degrees and hold his arm tightly against his waist so I could hold his forearm and wrist to walk with him. We walked up the gentle slope of a curving sidewalk. His pace was fast; I reined him in so I wouldn’t fall. Three or four minutes were enough. I sat down in my wheelchair and he took off at a breakneck speed, careening partway off the edge of the first curve. Sensing the wild abandon of his approach to movement, I was glad I’d been hanging on tightly to my wheelchair. Once we slowed down, he wanted to experience curbs and steps.

“Whoa! You can’t go straight down a curb! Stop for a minute! Wait!” I screamed. We jerked to an abrupt stop just in the nick of time. “Tip me waaa-y back on the back wheels and let gravity take us down,” I advised.

“Now, how do you go up?” Washi asked, after bumping us down the curb.

“Well, that’s a little harder. You lean me back again and depending on how high the curb is, you go up either forward or backward. It takes some practice.”

The first stop of the day was the ancient ruins of Moray. Washi took one look at the pack frame, strapped it on, and grinning, said, “Let’s go.” With Yvonne’s help, I sat down on the floor of the van and pulled off my legs. While the guides turned their backs, we rummaged through my day-pack to see if I could find a pair of shorts to wear. I gingerly butt-walked onto the seat of the pack frame and off we went. I looked back imploringly at Yvonne, hoping she would keep me safe.

“These huge, terraced amphitheatres were very important agricultural sites, kind of like greenhouses or experimental



Washi, Linda, and Yvonne
at Machu Picchu

biological stations. There is often a twenty-five degree Fahrenheit difference from the top terrace to the bottom one. Because of this, the Incas were able to grow and experiment with crops," Washi stated in his best tour-guide voice.

As we got closer, we could see an enormous, deep structure below us. But then, my view became just a little *too* good as Washi walked right up to the edge and leaned over, pointing out the site below.

"Washi! Don't! We are way too close to the edge!" I yelled. I was hanging partly in space on the back of someone who had never carried me before, and as I far as I knew, might have no sense of balance. Yvonne hustled to get her camera, saying this was too good to miss. Who knew whether I'd still be hanging on or at the bottom of the pit in the next few seconds?

"Come on, let's pretend we are condors!" Washi yelled, stretching out his arms and lean-

ing even farther over the edge of the precipice. At that point I realized I was going wherever he went, so I stretched my arm out as far as possible, whooped and hollered along with him, and hoped for the best.

After a short rest, Washi started down into an adjacent crater, one without a trail. He tackled the steep hill at a semi-gallop. It wasn't long before he slipped and slid down several feet as I hung on for dear life. Thankfully, it was steep enough that he was able to push himself up quickly with his hands and we continued to the bottom of the excavation without another mishap.

"We've got our wheelchair. Where is your pack frame?" Benjamin asked the next morning as we met at 6:30 in the hotel lobby for our trip to Machu Picchu.

I knew this would be another test of wills and ability within the first one hundred yards. Even in their home-built wheelchair, the going was

My don't-let-me-be-a-problem instinct reared up.

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pretty rough. According to *The Rough Guide To Peru*, "More than a hundred flights of steep stone steps interconnect its palaces, temples, storehouses and terraces, and the outstanding views command not only the valleys below in both directions, but also extend to the snowy peaks around Salcantay. Wherever you stand in the ruins, spectacular terraces can be seen slicing across ridiculously steep cliffs, transforming mountains into suspended gardens."¹

It was time for me to get out my book and watch the world go by, or so I thought, but for one last time our guides were going to pull out all the stops and take me through all the ruins. This time I'd be on their backs. I now knew better than to protest when they parked the wheelchair and suggested that I take my legs off so I could get in the pack frame and start our tour.

As he climbed ancient rock-hewn steps, Washi carried me on his back, aided by two trekking poles. Every few steps, he shifted the pack weight a little, did some deep breathing, and leaned a little farther forward. It sounded like he was chanting Quechua prayers, too. I scanned the hillside looking for hip-high, large flat resting rocks, pointing out the good ones, suggesting that they would be places we could rest. Benjamin traded off with him periodically and although I worried about them getting hurt, I soon realized that nothing I said would alter their plan for getting me to the prime viewing sites.

Late that afternoon, there was an unusual amount of chatter among our guides. Benjamin seemed to fade out of sight frequently and was attached to his cell phone more than normal. Seemingly on cue, we started uphill toward the Sun Gate. It dawned on me that Dave, Roger, and Carla must be finishing their four-day trek and should be heading down the trail into Machu Picchu. I got a little misty-eyed thinking about it. Looking around, it seemed that Yvonne and the guides were getting a little emotional too. And then suddenly Dave was coming around a corner twenty feet ahead of us. Now there were real tears...and this

time it wasn't just Linda.

For the past few days, we had overcome the typical limits of modern society's "invasion of privacy." I had been pushed, pulled, and carried by strangers. Likewise, they had been grabbed, held, and hugged by a stranger. When Dave volunteered to take his turn with the pack that afternoon, Benjamin said to him, "Don't take this privilege away from me. I may never get to do this again in my life."

We began to realize that as we get older, our travel will benefit more and more from the goodwill and camaraderie between us and strangers, strangers who become friends because of the opportunity to help each other. All nine of us felt a sense of accomplishment and an indescribable bond. We had given and taken from each other. Our worlds had become closer. And they had never "let me sit and read my book." ■

Note: The title is taken from the song "With a Little Help from My Friends," written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, and featured on the Beatles 1967 album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

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References

1. Dilwyn Jenkins, *The Rough Guide to Peru* (New York: The Rough Guides Ltd., 2006), 306.

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