

SOMETHING EXTRA:

TRAVEL LOG

Area woman helps disabled hit open road

BY JOAN BORAM
SPECIAL WRITER

Heidi VanArnem, president of Travel Headquarters in Birmingham, is a prototype of the '90s entrepreneur — a person who's smart enough to recognize a niche market that could be better served, and enterprising enough to go for it.

"I know how difficult it has always been for me to travel in a wheelchair, even when I was with my family or friends," says VanArnem, 27, who is quadriplegic. "And I wanted to start a travel agency that, while catering to the travel needs of all types of clients, would take special care to provide customized information and service to handicapped travelers."

Her caring philosophy has proven successful: business has grown every month during the two and one-half years since Travel Headquarters opened its doors. VanArnem attributes her company's growth mainly to word of mouth recommendations by satisfied clients.

"People who are afraid to travel take a trip, and then they have more confidence," says VanArnem, who lives in West Bloomfield. "We just had a client who went to Las Vegas with her husband. She has been disabled for a long time and had never traveled, thinking it would be too much of a hassle. They had a great time, and were surprised at how easy it was."

"Conditions have changed for the better," claims VanArnem. "The American Disabilities Act has been a major cause of improvement, and it has made both businesses and the general public more aware of the needs of the handicapped. It used to be if a hotel had a bar on the wall of the bathroom it called itself accessible, but now they have benches in the shower and shower hoses."

More than accessibility

VanArnem is specific about her clients' personal needs when planning a trip. "There are different levels of assistance for everybody. 'Disabled' isn't generic. There's more than just 'is the

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Barbara Bockoff
Bloomfield Hills

building accessible? Some people need Braille direction; not only must seeing eye dogs be accommodated, but service dogs are becoming more common, as well. Is there a space for them in the hotel room? Will someone be available to take them out? Many of my clients need to know what they have to have an airport van with a wheelchair lift is essential."

Some places naturally are better than others for the disabled traveler. The newer cruise ships have a lot to offer, including larger rooms to accommodate wheelchairs. "You can see a lot of islands and you don't have to deal with planes," says VanArnem. "Getting on and off a ship is much easier. You unpack just once, and the crews are generally very accommodating."

Las Vegas, Disney World and London, England get high marks. Not surprisingly, New York City is the worst.

The Travelin' Talk Network publishes a directory of names of contacts in various cities who have disabilities themselves. "I've never traveled that my wheelchair hasn't suffered a mishap, usually on the airplane," says VanArnem. "How would you know where to get a wheelchair fixed in a strange city? You can call someone listed in the directory and they will tell you."

VanArnem graduated from Oakland University with a minor in communications. While she isn't perfectly comfortable speaking to groups, she does address



JOHN STORME/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Just do it: Heidi VanArnem says that once people with disabilities experience travel, they find it's much easier than they thought.

groups of doctors and nurses in hospitals, non-profit groups, such as the Multiple Sclerosis Society, and support groups.

In part, it's a marketing effort for Travel Headquarters, but she also wants to convince others that it's possible for the disabled to enjoy traveling.

Wheelchair and all

Barbara Bockoff started just such a support group a little over a year ago, and the group invited VanArnem to speak to them.

"She came well prepared, with lots of facts about hotels and restaurants that have accommodations, and about tours that are

geared specifically toward people with disabilities," says Bockoff, a Bloomfield Hills resident. "The truth is that nobody really understands the needs of the disabled except somebody who is disabled. We responded to Heidi because we knew she knew our situation."

Bockoff, 50, has always loved to travel. After she became confined to a wheelchair 12 years ago, she decided that she wasn't going to let limited mobility stop her.

"If you have a sense of humor and can roll with the punches, you can handle almost anything," says Bockoff. "I had always wanted to go to Paris, and I knew it would be tough, but a companion

and I made the trip and it was worth any inconvenience. We visited all of the major museums, which were wheelchair accessible."

"Some restaurants were tough — it seems that they're all either up or down stairs. At one Italian restaurant, four waiters carried me and the wheelchair up and down, but nobody made a big deal out of it, so it was part of the experience."

"The hardest part of a long trip is dehydrating yourself, because it's impossible to get to the rest room on an airplane."

Bockoff keeps a detailed jour-

nal of any trips she takes, and gives copies to VanArnem to share with her clients. Like VanArnem, she's especially enthusiastic about Las Vegas. "It's one of the best places to go — all of the curbs are cut for wheelchairs. You almost never need to take a cab."

"London is a great place, also. The English people are very courteous and helpful, and those high London cabs are wonderful. Many of the cab drivers keep a wheelchair ramp in the trunk, or they can just sit the wheelchair at the curb and there's room in the back of the cab."

Here's how to make the most of traveling alone

BY JOAN BORAM
SPECIAL WRITER

A few years ago, a popular travel magazine had a contest for solo travelers. Anyone who correctly identified photos of famous solo travelers (such as Jonah) won a free trip for two. The winner refused to take a companion, saying, "If you travel alone, you're a traveler. If you travel with someone, you're a tourist."

Well put. The person who travels solo is bound to see more and think more about what she/he sees simply because there's no companion with whom to discuss things back home — the kids, co-workers, whatever. You have to look around you!

Too often, a person going on a trip concentrates on what to wear, especially for imagined occasions. (What if I get invited to an Embassy ball?) or how to save money. If you get invited to an embassy ball, the same fairy godmother who put you in the invitation will provide you with a gown.

As for money, you can rent four wheels and see four countries for \$12. Travel doesn't come any cheaper than that!

"Attitude and planning are the

main components of a successful trip," says West Bloomfield resident Sarah Murphy. "Clothing and money are accessories."

Business or pleasure

Murphy, an anchorwoman for Cable Channel 3's "Municipal Library Access Channel," enjoys traveling on her own in the line of business as well as for relaxation. "The mechanics of solo travel aren't much different from traveling with another person," says Murphy. "The challenge of traveling solo is that you, and only you, are responsible for maximizing the travel experience, for making decisions, and for having a good time. A lot of people forget they're supposed to have a good time."

Kaye Britton, president of Kaye Britton Travel, Ltd., in Farmington Hills, travels the world solo in two different formats. "I've been to Las Vegas and some European countries by myself; however, when I go to places like China or India, I go with a group, but not with a companion. I room alone, and pay the single supplement for the sake of privacy."

Britton admits that the single supplement is the bane of all solo

travelers, but there's no getting around it, unless you want to room with a stranger. Some cruise lines, such as Royal Caribbean, will make an effort to match solo travelers who seem to be compatible, and in some cases, if no other voyager applies, you can get the cabin for half price. On the other hand, if the non-smoker who does apply is a world-class snorer, it could be a very long trip.

"I've shared a cabin with a stranger who matched my specifications (and I hers)," says Britton. "And it has proven successful. But I've heard about disasters, too. Some travel agents keep a list of solo travelers looking for cabin-mates, but I don't feel that I want to get into that."

Here's her advice

Britton, offers some tips for travelers, based on her experience: ■ Learn a few words in the language of the country you're going to. If you can say "please," "thank you," "good morning," in the local tongue it will be appreciated as a gracious gesture. "How much" is very handy, also. ■ Don't take anything you don't

want to lose, or anything you can't carry a half a mile. That means no expensive jewelry or anything that has sentimental value. One bag and a carry-on should be enough for most vacations. Mix-and-match, and layer, and make sure anything that isn't black is washable. Take lots of tops, and one good dress or pantsuit for nice restaurants. ■ Be careful, but not scared. When you make your room reservation, ask for a room not too far from the elevator. "Once, and only once," says Britton, "The desk clerk handed my key to the bellman and announced my room number in a very loud voice. I took the key away from the bellman, handed it back to the desk clerk, and requested another room. I got it, quietly."

When you get into your room, double lock the door, if possible. If there's no double lock, put a piece of furniture in front of the door. Look for a fire exit. ■ Buying a ticket is the first step of a trip, but you'll have a better appreciation of the area if you visit the library and learn a little history. Literally thousands of political entities — cities, states,

whole countries — want you to visit them and spend money. Visitors bureaus are geared up to answer questions about their favorite place. Do them, and yourself, a favor. Ask them to send you maps and calendars of events.

Does Britton follow this advice? "Most of it, yes. But I have to admit that I do most of my background reading on the trip over. I'm too busy helping other people plan their trips to spend much time planning my own."

Murphy has one last bit of ad-

vice: "Be careful whom you share your travel plans with. We do know someone who'll say, 'What, you're going THERE? ALONE? You must be crazy! You don't speak the language. What if you get sick? I was there in 1948 — they're the rudest people on earth! And on and on.'"

"Do not tell these people you're planning a trip," advises Murphy. "Speak only to positive thinkers. Naysayers can plant seeds of doubt that will ruin your trip before you leave home."



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