





through their eyes

TTUHSC Alumna Advocates for Living with No Limits

By Jo Grant Langston | Photos provided by Stacy Cervenka

Imagine standing in the middle of Terminal B of the nearest airport.

The route seems easy enough to Terminal A, where a plane awaits, but it's not so easy for those with limited or no sight. People traffic, cart traffic, signs that can't be read. Traveling blindly in a sighted world is a challenge.

As one who has been blind since birth, Stacy Cervenka, MSRC, (Health Professions '14), is a lifelong advocate of rights for those with disabilities, especially the blind, and has taken a giant step forward in helping this population travel their neighborhoods and the world. She shows people how living full, thriving lives, that includes travel of all kinds, is possible for all. Her passion and hard work helped her become a finalist for the coveted Holman Prize in 2018, and she is putting the \$25,000 reward toward creating the Blind Travelers Network, a free online travel forum.

"It's a place to ask fellow blind travelers how to navigate through Walt Disney World, how to look after toddlers at a water park or whether Jamaica has blind-friendly snorkeling excursions," Cervenka said.

Cervenka hopes the Blind Travelers Network will open the doors for those with blindness to travel and also bring awareness of the travel resources needed for this group of people. "We should be a primary target for the travel industry because we want to travel just as sighted people do," she said. "We have the resources to travel and just need accurate and useful information."

*Stacy Cervenka, MSRC, (Health Professions '14)
and her husband, Greg DeWall, at the park with
their son, Leo.*

no LIMITS

Cervenka hasn't allowed her disability to put limitations on her life, whether she's giving tours to visitors on Capitol Hill, creating policy for federal employees with disabilities, or handling the day-to-day responsibilities of home and family. She currently serves as the grant administrator for the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Additionally, she serves as chairperson of the Blind Parents Group of the National Federation of the Blind, designing seminars, conferences and curriculum to help blind parents care for children in a sighted world. Cervenka was also recently appointed to serve on the Star Tran Advisory Board, where she works to expand and improve transportation options for citizens with disabilities.

Before moving to Lincoln, Nebraska, in 2018, Cervenka was the executive officer for the California State Rehabilitation Council, working to ensure that Californians with disabilities were represented and empowered to receive vocational services leading to gainful employment.

"We gave voice to our workers, so they could work and thrive in our society," Cervenka said. "Employees and employers many times don't understand exactly what rights those with disabilities have. Our work helped educate about those rights and advocate for equal treatment."

Prior to her duties in California, Cervenka worked in the U.S. Senate, first as an intern and then as assistant to Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan. "My first day, I was thinking I needed to raise the bar of their expectations. In my first hour, I was sent to retrieve a chart from the printing and graphics department. Because I am blind and unfamiliar with the building, I didn't know where that was." She completed the task and gained the trust of her co-workers. Cervenka worked on myriad legislative issues pertaining to Native American rights, crime and prisons.

raising a FAMILY

Cervenka is married to Greg DeWall, director of the Nebraska Center for the Blind, who was blinded in an accident as a teenager. Together, they are raising their two children, Leo, 5 and Josephine, 1, who are sighted. They simultaneously tackle parenting, marriage and life challenges with a few extra hurdles.

"Our calling to serve those who are blind bonds us," Cervenka added. "We talk about our work together. We parent our children. We travel. Our disabilities brought us together, and we solve the issues we face. We are committed to our family and to improving the quality of blindness rehabilitation."

Cervenka knows she's not alone in her unique circumstances, which is why she is an administrator for the Facebook page, "Blind Parents Connect," a sounding board for questions, concerns and challenges of blind parents. "Logistic challenges of blind parenting such as administering medication or matching clothes is easy to overcome by learning some simple alternative techniques," she said. "The primary challenge blind parents face is stigma and negative misconceptions about their capabilities, which often leads to isolation and marginalization within other parent communities."

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THE BLIND TRAVELERS NETWORK Opens Dialogue FOR THE BLIND

Travelers can share information about places that are truly accessible and welcoming to those who are blind.

Common concerns often include:

A restaurant is listed as accessible, but does it have Braille menus?

Hotels offer an "accessible" spa, but is there a staff member available to guide guests to it?

Do the resorts in foreign countries allow the blind to go horseback riding, since the Americans with Disabilities Act isn't enforced?



Stacy Cervenka hired a reader to give her an in-depth description of Magic Kingdom so she could plan their route.

Life-changing EXPERIENCES

During her time on Capitol Hill, Cervenka met dignitaries from around the world, opening the door for her to experience traveling the globe. A particularly important trip was to South Korea as part of a congressional staff delegation discussing the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement. She visited Buddhist temples, enjoyed dinners in their World Trade Center and dined seated on the floor in little country restaurants. Most memorably, she visited the Demilitarized Zone, the border between North and South Korea, an experience she calls one of the most intense in her life.

“We literally stood with soldiers from the North and South standing face-to-face,” she said. “We were inside the ‘blue meeting house’ that straddles the border — so I can technically say I’ve been to North Korea. I had to give up my white cane for fear that the North Korean soldiers would think it was a weapon. I use that cane for mobility, so I was a bit uneasy about not having it with me — it was one of the few times in my life that I’ve had to give it up.”

traveling the WORLD

Approaching things differently when you’re a blind parent desiring to travel the world is vital to success.

“Though we have ziplined through the rain forest canopy in Costa Rica, hiked Mayan ruins in Belize and caught 200 pounds of tuna on a local fisherman’s boat in Mexico, the most challenging thing we’ve ever done is take our son — who was almost 3 years old at the time — to Disney World,” she said.

The trip required a different type of research and pre-planning than it would for a sighted family — there are 25 on-property resorts, four main theme parks, two water parks and an overwhelming amount of dining options. “We needed easily accessible transportation to the parks and resort staff available to take us to the boat or bus. Before we left, I hired a reader to give me an in-depth description of Magic Kingdom so I could plan the route. We needed to purchase passes and acquire disability access. At one point, we searched for a bathroom for 45 minutes! It was stressful, but one we will always remember fondly.”

Cervenka considers the family’s outings no more stressful than those of a sighted family. “We have great orientation about our travel destinations, and we are well-trained in cane mobility. With appropriate research about travel accommodations, coupled with our training, we have great experiences. Simply attaching little bells to our children’s shoes helps us stay safely connected to them at water parks or at a beach. We have great communication with the resort staffs, with each other and with our children.”

Cervenka said the misconceptions many people have of the blind is what makes traveling a challenge. One example was a planned private horseback trail ride where the stable owner refused to let them ride, even though Cervenka and DeWall had extensive riding experience. They brought in advocates from the



National Federation of the Blind and the stable’s lawyer to explain that it was against the law to discriminate against people with disabilities, based solely on perceived notions about what people can and cannot do. “Months later, we completed our ride,” she said. “We’re glad that we fought to educate this stable, but it was frustrating to fight tooth and nail just to have a pleasant ride.”

Experiences like this fueled Cervenka to develop the Blind Travelers Network.

“We want travelers to have a resource to warn others about negative attitudes they might encounter, so they can make decisions about whether to do business at a certain place,” she said. “Will they have to fight to receive service or simply take their business elsewhere? The network will give blind people the information they need to make informed choices about where they would like to travel. We can swim with the dolphins. We can ride horseback, and we can snorkel. The Blind Travelers Network will provide a base of information about those locations welcoming to our families.” 