Hadley

Hadley Presents: Sites Unseen

Presented by Ricky Enger

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Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode we discuss traveling with blindness or vision loss, and our guests are Dr. Wendy David, author of *Sights Unseen: Traveling the World Without Sight*, interviewed by Hadley learning expert, Debbie Good.

Ricky Enger: So today's topic is going to be amazing. I don't get to do a lot of travel, but I really enjoy it when I do, so I'm looking forward to getting a lot of tips and tricks and things like that, as we proceed with the episode. But before we do that, I want to learn a little about you guys. So let's start with you, Wendy. Tell us a little about yourself.

Wendy David: Happy to be here, first of all. Always happy to talk about travel. I am by profession a clinical psychologist. I've been a clinical psychologist, I hate to say it, but for 30 years now. I'm in a little different capacity right now than I was when I wrote the book. At the time I wrote the book, it was published in 2010, *Sights Unseen: Traveling the World Without Sight*, I was working as a staff psychologist at the Veterans Administration Hospital. My career has always focused around post-traumatic stress disorder. I hadn't worked primarily with visually impaired clients at the VA. I worked in a mental health area. But I am totally blind myself. I am married to a totally blind man. And I've done contract work for about 20 years now with the Department of Services for the Blind with some of their clients. So a little bit of professional work in that regard, but a lot of personal experience obviously. I am a guide dog user. I have been since I was 18 years old. Maybe I'll stop there and let Debbie continue.

Ricky Enger: Sounds great. Debbie, tell us a little about you. I know that I've enjoyed working with you at Hadley, although I'm a little newer to it than you are, so let's find out a bit about you.

Debbie Good: I've been at Hadley for 26 years now, mostly as a language teacher with Spanish and French. So traveling has been a passion for me all of my life, and that's why I'm so attracted to this topic and I'm so excited about talking to you, Wendy. I know that many people like to travel. But for some it seems so intimidating. It really takes them out of their comfort zone. So how is it that you have the confidence and the savvy to travel around the world, which you have many times?

Wendy David: Well, I wasn't born that way, let me tell ya. So I too had to go through a period of building up my confidence and learning what worked and what didn't work. And I really want to stress to people that you don't have to... if you're learning how to swim, you don't have to start by jumping into the deep end. We're so fortunate nowadays as blind and visually impaired people, because there are just a ton of resources out there. And maybe I can just back it up a little bit and give you more of my history of travel.

So I was married for 15 years to a sighted man. I have a sighted son. And so when we would go on vacations, it was always kind of from a sighted perspective. And even though I would most of the time take my guide dog with me, I didn't necessarily plan the trip, I didn't necessarily look for accessible options per se. I sort of tagged along with my sighted husband and my sighted son, and if there were any descriptions to be had or locations to be found, I would just sort of go with them.

And then after I got divorced and started kind of looking at the rest of my life and how I wanted to live it, I realized that I really did like to travel. But I never had really traveled by myself except professionally. I've gone to a lot of conferences. I've gone to presentations. At that time I felt pretty confident getting on a plane and going to a conference center or a hotel and getting my schedule and being where I was supposed to be and doing my talk or whatever. But I didn't do much about getting outside of the hotel or going sightseeing, things like that. That to me just wasn't really in my realm.

So it wasn't until later on in life when I started dating my now husband, Larry, and he is now totally blind himself from retinitis pigmentosa. But he was sighted for many years and he was also married to a sighted woman. I said to him at the time, "I really think you're great and I like you a lot, but I really want, and I foresee myself being a traveler. Now that my son is older, and now that I'm starting to finally be able to save some money, I want to travel. And I'm not sure how that would be, either by myself or with another blind person." It was a real concern I had. And so in his wisdom, he said, "Well, why don't we just try it out?" And I said, "Okay, but you plan it." So I put it on him initially, and I must say he did a stellar job.

And so we decided to start very small, and we started with a day field trip. So we live in Seattle. He planned for us to take a day field trip to Victoria, which is part of Vancouver, British Columbia. And so we took the Clipper ship, which is a hydrofoil, we went over to Victoria. And we had to figure out how to get to a museum where he had arranged a docent to show us around, just some different ideas of how to spend the day. And then would we be able to find the boat to come back, how would we do that, and all of these questions in my head. But he said he was going to take charge of it, and so I let him, and it was actually one of the most fun dates and days we've ever had.

Did it go as I thought it might go? No. It was actually really, really fun. And what it showed me was that it really can be done, and maybe what I needed to do was just look at things a little differently. But I really try to do in my life, and what I try to do in my psychology practice with my clients, is to help people understand that different doesn't necessarily mean inadequate or inferior, that different means different, and that it's really important to open up our minds to allow for differences and to embrace them. If we have in our minds or in our heads that travel means you drive in a car and someone explains all the sights, and you get out and you walk up and down steps of a cathedral, and you learn all the history, and that's the only thing you do, then it might not feel the same, or it might not feel as good to you, if you find a way to do it differently.

And what I've learned over the years is that I have found lots of ways of doing things differently that have actually been really enriching experiences, but I had to start where I felt comfortable. Now, feeling comfortable doesn't necessarily mean you don't feel anxious, and it doesn't necessarily mean it's not a little scary at first, but I think if you do some pre-planning, and you ask yourself what's important to you, and you're willing to ask questions, and talk to people, and contact agencies and ask questions, there's really nothing anymore that you can't do as a blind traveler, either alone or with other blind people.

Debbie Good: Yes, Wendy, you mentioned that you started out by just taking a day trip to Victoria just to try it out, and I really enjoyed the part in your book where you say, "If you can go to the grocery store, you can travel the world."

Wendy David: That's true.

Debbie Good: When you go to the grocery store, you're going to plan how you're going to get there, you're going to grab your recyclable grocery bag, make a list, ask questions about the sales items, what's looks good that day, maybe ask someone for some assistance. So if you can go to the grocery story, you can travel the world.

Wendy David: Yeah, it's really true. And I think it's getting down to the basic steps, the basic building blocks of what it takes. And there's lots of ways of going to the grocery store. You might take a bus to the grocery store, you might take a cab to the grocery store, you might walk to the grocery store. But whatever you do, you have to have in your mind a way that you're going to do it. I say to people, there's so many ways to the top of the mountain. Some people go straight up, some people go round and round, and some people choose to take a helicopter. The main thing is if you want to do it, find a way to do it. And there's lots of ways to do it.

Debbie Good: So speaking of that, there are so many fun and wonderful places to go in the world. So what are some self-reflection tips or whatever that you use when you decide where you want to go?

Wendy David: It's really interesting because that has changed a lot depending upon what's happening in my personal and professional lives. So for a long time when I was at the VA hospital, it was very mentally draining. So I found for me that what I needed a lot of times was a physically active vacation, because I tend to unwind, I can reduce some of my mental fatigue, by being physically tired. So for quite a long time my vacations would consist of physically active things such as skiing, going where there were organized ski groups with guides for visually impaired, or arranging for my own guide in a place that I wanted to go to, hikes, different types of activities that were more physically stressful. Now in my more seasoned years, I still enjoy that and I still ski, but I also really have sort of become quite fond of being pampered. I really like relaxing vacations where I can spend time reading, and I can spend time reflecting and sort of having my own schedule.

What's really important, I think, for anyone who's going to travel, is to really ask yourself what it is you want to accomplish on this trip. So I'll give you an example. About three years ago, I found a lovely cruise that went to the Mediterranean. This particular cruise spent three days in Israel, and we went with a couple other friends were also blind, so there were four of us on this trip together, all blind. It was very important to me to see some specific sites in Israel, and it was not that important for them. And so I decided that since that was very important to me, that I found a tour guide in Israel who I happened to find, who's in my book, *Sights Unseen*. It was with Israel4all. And I prearranged with him ahead of time that when our boat docked in Israel for the three days, these were some sites that I really wanted to go to, and that I really would like kind of a very detailed audio described tour.

And it was wonderful. And the friends kind of varied. One of them went one day, one of them went another day, another went another day. But I went every day, because that was really important to me. And I thought that that worked out really nicely because I took control over what really was important to me. I don't think I would've gotten as much out of it if I had gone on one of the cruise tours, although my friends went on some cruise tours and they enjoyed them.

So I think what's really important every time you travel is to ask yourself what is important. If you want to go sightseeing, figure out a way to have it work out. If you want to go shopping, sometimes I prefer shopping with a sighted person by myself, sometimes I love going shopping with another blind friend and just exploring. But think about it ahead of time, what is it you're interested in.

Debbie Good: Yes, and as part of this discovering new things, having new experiences, have you found it useful to use a travel agent or a tour group?

Wendy David: It's a really interesting question. I have not used a specific travel agent, but I have found certain travel agencies that I'm comfortable with, particularly for cruises. I do like the Vacations To Go website because you can get some good breaks on those, and they do also have an accessibility department where they will also serve as liaison between you and the cruise ship for requirements for the guide dog and things like that. However, I never leave everything up to that person. I tend to always double-check, because sometimes things do fall through the cracks, sometimes people change positions. So I tend to still act as my own travel agent. And if I want to do something specifically, I like to do a lot of research online ahead of time. I look at reviews, I talk to other people, I look at websites, and I try to read a lot about where I'm going, what I'm doing.

Recently, and for the first time this last year, I just recently trained with a new guide dog and retired my last guide dog of eight years, and in her final year she was getting a little more tired and she was okay being left at home with my husband if I traveled. So I decided that I would try something different just for that last year, and I did join a tour group for other visually impaired tourists, that also had sighted guides available within that group. And I decided that if it was a place that I normally would not be comfortable taking my dog, such as too long of an air flight, or not a safe destination for my dog, or a place that was going to be really very heavily loaded with sightseeing things, that I just really would like to, otherwise I would have to arrange my own tour guide, that it would make sense for me to do that.

So I have gone with a group out of England called Traveleyes, and I've had mixed results with that. But one of my favorite trips with them was the trip to Nepal, and I would not have taken my dog to Nepal because Nepal has a lot of rabies. It was also 36 hours flight for me to get there. And so I did. I traveled alone with my cane to Nepal, and then I met the group there, and then during that week traveled with them. And I do have another trip coming up in March to Vietnam. I've worked with Vietnam vets for 30 years, and I've always wanted to go to Vietnam. So I am going to go to Vietnam and, again, my husband's going to watch this dog, but I wanted to make sure I'd had her a year prior to doing that.

Some people are more comfortable traveling that way, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with it. I prefer to travel that way if it's something that I wouldn't feel comfortable doing totally on my own or it isn't conducive to taking my guide dog, because I really, really enjoy traveling with my guide dog, and I really enjoy traveling with other blind people who are also adventurous themselves. So I have just really sort of shifted my enthusiasm to different things that I enjoy, I guess, as I've gotten older.

Debbie Good: So Wendy, you mentioned that now you prefer traveling by yourself or with other blind people. What are some of the differences you've seen with traveling with sighted people and with blind people?

Wendy David: What's really interesting is that when I travel with sighted people, I find that I am on their agenda, and I don't know that it has to be that way, but for me it ends up being that way. If they want to go certain place, that's where we go. If I want to do something different, I might do it, but usually I don't. I tend to be less adventuresome, I think, when I'm with other sighted people. When I'm by myself I think it challenges me when I'm with other blind people. I have no one else to depend on, but us. And I have found for me that the sense of accomplishment, the sense of pride, and the sense of adventure is so much fun, that those are the memories I have from trips.

One of my favorite trips was that Mediterranean trip with our two other blind friends. Another one of my favorite trips was I put together a cruise for eight of us to Mexico, eight blind people. And we had so much fun and we laughed so hard, that a year later when I was booking another cruise, a tour guide said, "Were you on that ship a year ago with a bunch of other blind people?" And I said, "Yeah, I kind of organized it." And he goes, "You guys looked like you were having so much fun, I wanted to just sit at your table." So I don't know, I think it's very freeing for me as a blind person to know that I can do this on my own.

There are times now after the Mediterranean cruise, I didn't want to arrange for more tour guides. I didn't want to do anymore arranging. It does take time, it does take energy and it does take effort. And so I was happy to do the Nepal trip after that where all I had to do was show up, and that felt good too. But then, keep in mind, you're on their schedule. If you want to go somewhere else, you know you probably won't be doing that. You're doing what the schedule is on that tour. So there's trade-offs for everything. But on that trip, I did get to ride on an elephant, and I probably wouldn't have done that by myself because it was way out in the jungle, and I don't think I would have ventured there on my own.

So there are definite pros and cons to everything. And again, I just encourage people to try different things and to ask enough questions ahead of time so that you know what's going to be important to you, and will you be able to find a way to get close to your goal and your value in that trip.

Debbie Good: That makes sense, Wendy. It sounds like if you do the proper preparation, soul searching, do you want to be hiking or on a beach, you go to some useful websites, you decide who you want to travel with, or by yourself, or on a tour group, or strike off on your own, all of these are possibilities. And you're a great example and inspiration for us to travel the world. So thank you so much.

Wendy David: Thank you. My pleasure.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, I appreciate this as well. I, again, as I said, I don't travel as much as I'd like, just simply because of time constraints. But I think everything you said really rings true in terms of starting small and just finding what works for you, where you want to go, who you want to go with, and be a little adventurous. I love that. So we've talked a lot about your book, and if people want to find that book, where would they go to do that?

Wendy David: Well, the book is no longer available for purchase unfortunately, but it is free now, so that may be even better for folks. So it is available on BARD, Library of Congress, *Sights Unseen: Traveling the World Without Sight*, by Wendy David. It's also available on Bookshare. So hopefully you have access to either of those two formats, and I encourage you to read it.

Ricky Enger: And we'll place links to those services in the show notes. So what if people want to maybe ask some follow-up questions, or they just want to thank you for the information that you've provided here, how might they contact you?

Wendy David: I always love hearing from fellow travelers and hearing about your experiences, and hopefully how and if the book helped you. So feel free to contact me. My website is a professional website for my psychology practice, but I'm happy to give you my email address. And I will give you actually my professional Gmail address because it's more reliable. So it is dr.wendydavid@gmail.com.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. And Debbie, of course people can find you in the Travel Talk as well as the Spanish Chat discussion groups, and you guys really should, because they're both incredible. Where else can people contact you if they want to?

Debbie Good: You can email me at good@hadley.edu. Just G-O-O-D, there's no E. I have the good email, so good@hadley.edu.

Ricky Enger: That's good. Well, again, thank you both so much for being on the show and sharing experiences. I think that this information is going to be very useful for people who are either just starting out traveling, or people that might be a little more seasoned travelers but still want a few tips and tricks. Again, thank you for joining us.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents, or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.