Hadley Presents

Tips for Hosting with Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

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, Hadley learner Sharon Noseworthy joins us to share her tips and tricks for hosting a successful gathering. Welcome to the show, Sharon.

Sharon Noseworthy: Thank you, Ricky. It's a pleasure to be here.

Ricky Enger: Excellent, I love how this came about. You were actually taking some Hadley workshops and giving us great feedback, and during that process you noticed, hey, I think something might be missing and I can contribute some ideas if you're all amenable to that and certainly we were, just to have the chance to sit down with you and talk about something that I know many, many people struggle with, I do myself certainly, thinking about having people into my home and making it a relaxing and fun experience. So, I'm so happy that you're here to share some tips and tricks. Before we jump into the questions, why don't we just get a little intro and tell us a bit about who you are?

Sharon Noseworthy: Well, I am a lady with low vision who loved to host. I was the one who liked to provide the venue for any type of gathering. I did all the family gatherings and that could be anywhere from five of us to up to 40 of us. I lost my vision, or it started to decrease when I was in my early 50s and initially thought, I can't do this anymore, but I realized how important it is to our mental health, our physical health to socialize with others. So, I found out that I can do it, I just have to take a little bit more time and do it in a smarter way.

Ricky Enger: So, when I think about gatherings, I start to imagine, okay, I have 40 people in my house and I wish I had a bigger kitchen and oh no, there's so much that can go wrong and before I've even envisioned the possibility of doing this, I've talked myself out of it because it feels so big and so overwhelming and I think a lot of people can relate to that. So, rather than throwing everything into the mix and saying, you're going to host a huge dinner party, is there some way that someone who really wants to do that socializing, who to bring people into their home, what's the best way to kind of take that first step that's not so overwhelming?

Sharon Noseworthy: First of all, be yourself. If you are casual, be casual. If you enjoy something a little bit more formal, like I do, then do what's comfortable for you, but the key there is be yourself and start off small. If you're really nervous, just invite someone in for a coffee or a tea and a cookie, and my first tip is put a napkin under those cookies on that plate, so they don't slip off. Once you've invited someone in for a coffee and that went well, you might invite two or three others to join you. Then after that, you might want to go on to a small lunch with one other person, build it up in increments, step by step by step, and once you feel comfortable, then try something new.

The key to that is planning. Even if it's just a cup of coffee and a cookie, you have to plan. Do I have the sugar, the cream, the spoon, the plate, the bag of cookies, if that's what we're using, and put everything by the coffee pot or the coffee maker. I love a coffee maker because I just push a button and it's all pre-measured, which helps me to feel more comfortable. So, that's what I would say, Ricky, just take it slow.

Ricky Enger: So, when you did this, you had a lot of hosting duties under your belt before you began losing vision, and then you needed to just jump in and figure out what worked, so that you could continue doing that thing that you loved. Do you have some just stories that you can share about things that happened when you jumped in and figured it out and maybe things didn't go exactly as planned or just something that you learned along the way?

Sharon Noseworthy: I think I'll start off with something simple, like a coaster. Get rid of the coasters and use little cocktail napkins instead because I found repeatedly, I was putting my cup on the edge of that and causing myself a problem, and along those lines, I couldn't see the plain glass any longer. So, I saw these pretty blue, long-stemmed wine glasses, and I bought them, and I put them on the table and, sighted or not, those glasses were not a good idea. So, now I just use a squatty, short glass. It doesn't matter what I give other people, I have my comfort glasses, I call it, and I might prefer a red wine to a white wine, cranberry juice to ginger ale, for example, so that the glass is more visible, and along those lines, I'm always looking for my cup. My friends and I are getting older, and we tried the trinkets, but nobody could remember which trinket was theirs. Now, we've created paper donuts with a slit and we put our names on those paper donuts and put them around the stem of the glass and if I lose mine, they can help me find it. I saw the most beautiful tablecloth and it had the most beautiful pattern. So, I purchased it and I put it on the table only to find out that everything blended into that pattern, and I couldn't see a thing.

So, now I use a plain polyester cloth that can be thrown into the washer and contrast is good there too. If the dishes are dark, then light, and vice versa. Oh, I remember once I put the cloth on upside down, but the guests, they didn't mention it and I don't even think they noticed. And I think the funniest one was I had made a plan and I didn't stick with my plan. My plan was dishes in the cupboard, we'll serve in the kitchen, and take the dishes to the table. I didn't stick with the plan, the food got put on the table, we all sat down, and the people stared at me, dishes still in the cupboard. I learned to make a plan and stick with it.

Ricky Enger: As you're planning one of these things, it can be easy to maybe get hung up on certain details and it turns out that some things are really, really important that you should stick with the plan and some things, maybe you just have something in your mind that turns out not to necessarily be true about hosting a gathering. Are there things that people tend to believe about having a successful gathering, that just turn out not to be true?

Sharon Noseworthy: There's so many myths. One of them being that you have to have all your dishes matching. The fact that all of the dishes have to be porcelain? No, paper plates are perfectly acceptable, especially in a larger gathering and the fact you have to do it all yourself, no. I use the bakery, I use the deli, I may use the pasta shop for a lasagna, for example, or even a frozen lasagna. I will use takeout. Some of our best parties have been with takeout. We used to have a large gathering going to a restaurant and it just got smaller and smaller groups. So, one day I called someone and said, why don't we have pizza at the house? That was a huge success. The guests brought the pizza, and we had a marvelous time. I also have called a couple of other friends and said, I am really looking forward to some Chinese, but dinner for two isn't nearly as exciting as dinner for six. And again, we share the cost, and we have a party. Guests like to bring food and it makes so much more sense than say a hostess gift and potlucks can be so simple and so wonderful. The other thing, real myth, that I find is entertaining is expensive. Well, it can be, but it doesn't have to be. If you give me two cans of chickpeas, a can of tomatoes and a little bit of grated, we call it shaky, Parmesan cheese, I can make a soup that I have served a company. The same goes with a good chili. So, there are many myths. I think we can dispel most of them.

Ricky Enger: And it helps so much because if there's anything to just take away from the stress of putting together a gathering like that and get you closer to the real purpose of it, which is just to get together and have fun. Are there things that are sort of universal when it comes to hosting a gathering, whether you're hosting two people or 50 people, are there things that you've found that really help you to have a successful time with it all?

Sharon Noseworthy: Yes, and the first thing I'll say, it goes back to taking the time to think about it and being organized. I often think of my event like a recipe. I know what the outcome is going to be if I'm serving tea and a cookie. I know what the event is, but I still have to think about it. Do I have the tea? Do I have the cookies? What time is the guest arriving? Is everything set out, the beverage area it's all set out if we're serving just the coffee, the creamer, the sugar, the spoon? So, that I'm totally organized. If I'm having a birthday, for example, I make sure I have the serviettes and a birthday candle. If I'm organizing a luncheon, I'll think about it a couple of days ahead of time. Groceries, I want to get those a couple of days ahead of time.

Whether I pick them up or someone else picks them up for me, as we know, Ricky, quite often we end up having to go back to that grocery store for something and I make sure I have all of the tools. For example, if we need a corkscrew, I've got the corkscrew or what I like to do is have a pile of clean dish cloths and tea towels for cleanup afterwards. I do not want a candle on my table or anywhere in my house. So, they're put away and on the center of my table will be a jug of water, maybe with a slice of two of lemon in it, and some glasses around it so that people can help themselves. I clear off the tables where we're going to be sitting, so that I can put my things down without a problem and my guests can put things down without a problem.

If it's a larger gathering, I use Siri for the timer. I have a comprehensive schedule of what I'm going to do, and I probably have the times written down. As result, Siri is in my pocket. That's what I use to expedite that process and ensure that I'm where I'm supposed to be when I'm supposed to be there. I'll set the table a day ahead of time if we're going to be seated and wrap the cutlery in some napkins. For dessert, the dessert plates are in the cupboard with the pie server and the knife, et cetera, so all we have to do is open that cupboard. I'm a great believer in preparing ahead of time.

Ricky Enger: That's great, just a list of things that you can do so that you're not rushing around the day of trying to do things and you are not relaxed, and so it's probably not going to be a relaxing gathering. I love the tip about setting the table way ahead of time as well because you can put things exactly where you want them to be without there being guests there and you're wondering where everyone is, and if you're going to put something down in a place where there's already something else, nope, you've cleared the table. You've got it set. All of those things make perfect sense just to do them ahead of time, so that you are comfortable.

And I guess speaking of being comfortable, it can feel really uncomfortable for some of us to invite people into the home because there is the situation of sometimes people want to be a little too helpful when you have low vision or you're blind, and you have somebody asking if you need help to find your own kitchen and that can be a little disheartening. So, do you have some tips about just staying comfortable, staying in control of your own space? You are the host and at the same time maybe some help is welcome. So, how do you manage that?

Sharon Noseworthy: And again, I think that goes back to being organized and thinking things through ahead of time, recognizing what you do need help with, as you said, and where you really don't want help. I'm going to include my husband in this because he gets flustered in the kitchen if there's anyone else, including me, in that kitchen. So, to have guests invade his space, it becomes uncomfortable for everybody. So, my job is to ensure that when a guest comes to the kitchen and says, may I help you, I either firmly say no, please help yourself to a beverage or whatever. If I need their help, which I often do with the pre-dinner beverage, I will designate somebody to do that please, and would you mind refreshing the guest's glass? So, they're quite pleased to do that, and that takes away that responsibility. The persistent person, I keep a plate of appetizer just for that occasion and I trust it in their hands and say, would you mind passing this, please?

I will also ask somebody to help me with dessert. If we go back to that pie, there is no way I'm going to cut that into eight equal pieces. I just take everything out of the cupboard, as I mentioned, it was all there. I'll either do it in the kitchen or place it on the table in front of them and they're very happy to do that. So, the key here is to designate, to keep control over the situation with a cheerful smile, be firm about what and where you do and do not need help.

Ricky Enger: Again, there's nothing more disheartening than having someone try and take control and make you feel like a stranger in your own home, so having these tips that assure that you stay in control and also make other people feel useful because they enjoy that, so that's perfect. As we wrap up here, I'm wondering about kind of the overall purpose of a gathering, which is to let everyone come in, have a great time, enjoy each other's company, and it sounds like, well of course that's what you want to do. It's maybe not obvious how to go about doing that. So, how can you ensure that you're having a gathering where there's not this silence as everyone is clicking their forks on their plates and it's awkward? How do you do that?

Sharon Noseworthy: I think we've talked a lot about food and place settings, et cetera, but I think it's a good reminder that it's not about the food, it's not about the place setting. It's totally about the companionship and having a common interest is the key, whether that is the fact that you're familiar with each other, and you're going to review your history, storytelling, et cetera, whether it's something new that you are trying together. For example, we've had a real success with wine tasting. We call it food and wine tasting because there's more emphasis on the food, which everybody just brings an appetizer of some sort, and I've since learned that you can do the same thing with tea. There are so many wonderful teas out there and people could come and bring their favorite tea and people could try that.

The same thing could work with coffee pods, as a matter of fact, or craft beer or cheeses. It's just your imagination with the tasting. There's also travel, and even if you aren't traveling, you can live vicariously through others who travel, and I've joined and enjoyed travel log groups. Everybody has about a half an hour to present their last trip or their trip that they're researching. Also, birds sounds, Babbel, getting together to learn a new language. I joined a group where the gentleman had a lot of learning tapes, and even though I couldn't see the videos, I could hear them, and then we talked about what was in those videos afterwards. Trivia, that's also a wonderful thing. I played cards for a long time with large print cards, and now we have to use electronics for me to play and I thought I could turn on my PC, I could turn on my iPad, two people could bring their iPad and the four of us can play in my home electronically.

Ricky Enger: As long as everyone is together and having a great time, I guess that's what makes a successful gathering. I love it. Sharon, I want to thank you, so, so much for sharing your stories, all of your tips and making this sound like a less daunting venture and actually making it sound like a lot of fun. Do you have any last thoughts that you want to share?

Sharon Noseworthy: Yes, I've taken a basket of ideas and thrown them out and I'm hoping somebody will gather one of them and be inspired to open their door and say, hello, won't you come on in?

Ricky Enger: Thank you, I love it. Thanks so much for joining us.

Sharon Noseworthy: Thank you, Ricky, for having me here.

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.