

## My personal Santa

*V.S. Sunder*

I just got back from a two-week visit to UK, and I wish to write about the extraordinary efforts made by one individual to have made this trip a reality.

It all started with this mathematician friend of mine insisting that I should come to a conference he was organising in Wales, with the promise that he would make absolutely sure that everything was arranged in an accessible way. (He also happens to be a ardent follower of this column and my blog!) He wanted to facilitate my attending this conference at the relatively small Aberystwyth University if at least to sensitise the University enough to create the infrastructure necessary to enable a person with disabilities to attend a conference there and be entirely independent in doing so.

What was also attractive about the invitation was the possibility of augmenting the conference with a week's holiday driving around Scotland with my family in a rented car equipped with automatic transmission - which convenience eliminates the need for a clutch pedal and work for my left leg, which is the 'game one'. And I really looked forward to this throw-back to times when I could drive my family around.

And Claus, this friend in Wales (who is in fact a lean German and, in spite of his white hair and beard, is totally unlike the usual picture one has of Santa) was simply marvelous. He truly understands the need/desirability of a person like me being able to function in as independent a manner as is possible. He had arranged rentals of wheel-chairs, both a motorised one for use during the first week in Wales, and a manually operated one that could be conveniently taken in the car during our planned driving excursion in the second week - always after consulting with me (we probably exchanged about 125 emails in two months!). And he had organised a shuttle to take the delegates from our hotel to the conference venue, making sure to order a vehicle which had the facility of enabling me to drive my wheel-chair up a ramp and into the shuttle. On top of everything else, he drove a rented car from Aberystwyth in Wales to the wheel-chair rental place which was about 50 miles south of Birmingham, picked up the wheelchair, then picked us up at Birmingham airport, and drove us back to Aberystwyth. And what is most striking about this

act of kindness was that this must have chewed up from noon to 7 pm on the Sunday immediately preceding the start of a very successful and well-attended conference that he had done most of the organising for. And for the icing on the cake, he made reservations for us at a hotel in walking distance from Birmingham airport for the night before the 0630 departure of our return flight from UK, and of course, again dropped us back at Birmingham airport - after dropping off the rented wheelchair, this time sacrificing his time from 2 pm to 12 pm on a Friday. All because he **understood** what I have been trying to say in this column, and wanted to rubbish my statement to him some months ago that the days of my country-hopping to attend conferences was over!

You cannot imagine how therapeutic it is to be able to: (a) travel through a town for distances close to 2 kilometres (being the distance from the University to the Hotel we were put up at) unaccompanied on a wheelchair (thanks to the Welsh infrastructure making sure that the pavements were equipped with convenient ramps to get onto the road from them; contrast this with <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/disability-rights-group-finds-flaws-in-construction-of-footpaths/article3928450.ece> which describes the situation in our capital!); and (b) drive approximately 1500 miles (from Wales to Scotland and back) all on my own. I cannot think of anybody doing so much for another person with no ulterior motive, and only because he was convinced that it was important to enable me to attend the conference with a modicum of 'independence'! The world would be a far more livable place for people with disabilities, if it had more people with the sensitivity of this extraordinary friend of mine.