Talking Transportation: Commuting in a Wheelchair

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You think you have a bad commute? Try doing Maclean Sarr's hour and a half trip each way — in a wheelchair.

Unable to walk since contracting cerebral palsy as an infant, the 22-year-old Sarr is now a student at Gateway Community College in New Haven but lives in Westbrook. That means a 28-mile trip each way, in his motorized wheelchair, in a bus, a train and another bus.

Sarr lives within "walking distance" of the Westbrook station serving Shore Line East trains, but there are no sidewalks and too much traffic, so the Nine Towns Transit bus is his best option.

Arriving at the "beautiful new (train) station" he drives his chair up a ramp and positions himself for the rear car of the train where his chair can be accommodated.

But last Monday when the train arrived, nobody could find the metal bridge plate to cover the six-inch gap between the platform and the railcar. So the train left without him. That's when he went to Twitter.

I saw his cry for help and forwarded it to the right folks at CDOT who immediately contacted Amtrak (which operates Shore Line East trains) and addressed the issue. Thank you, CDOT!

But this incident got me thinking of what it must be like to commute without being able to walk. Chatting with Maclean, I found him to be smart, articulate and in no way bitter about his lot in life.

“It’s like an adventure every day,” he told me. “I don’t get out much, being something of a homebody,” so studying at Gateway is obviously the high point of his day.

Maclean travels alone without the assistance of an aide, juggling books and a laptop on his 500 pound motorized wheelchair. He doesn’t describe himself as handicapped and certainly not disabled, just “wheelchair bound.”

Bad weather is a challenge especially on icy surfaces. “I feel safe,” he says. “It just means you have to take extra time.” Heavy rain is more of a hassle as he can’t carry an umbrella but has to keep his chair’s joystick controls dry.

The reason Maclean and almost 3 million other wheelchair users in this country can get around is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which became law in 1990 and turned transportation into a civil right. Any transit agency accepting federal money to buy trains or buses must make them accessible.

“It’s hard enough to find a job, let alone get there,” says Doug Holcomb of Greater Bridgeport Transit. “So many of these people have nobody to help them. Our paratransit service even takes people to the hospital.”

Organizations like The Kennedy Center in Trumbull offer free “travel training” courses for clients with all kinds of mobility challenges, from the physical (like being blind or unable to walk) to the emotional (like phobias or inability to read a timetable). The mobility their clients have achieved has changed their lives.

How can we help a fellow commuter we might come across, someone who is blind, in a wheelchair or otherwise physically challenged?

“Ask first,” says Maclean. “Other commuters are very nice,” he says. “But they think they’re helping me when they may actually be getting in the way.”

Even if those in need decline your help, chat them up. You’ll enjoy getting to know your fellow commuters.

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Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the Commuter Action Group*, sits on the* Merritt Parkway Conservancy *board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. You can reach him at* CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.