

**'Dialogue' is journey into darkness**

Exhibit that renders sighted people blind aims to heighten sense of challenges facing the disabled

By Dahleen Glanton

ATLANTA — The experience began in a small room that gradually grew pitch-black.

"Follow my voice," a soft-spoken woman said from a distance. "Use your cane to guide you."

She led visitors through a park, asking them to listen to the birds chirping, to bend down and smell the flowers, to run their hands along the chain-link fence and imagine what it must look like there. They shopped in a grocery store, feeling their way through the aisles for coffee, pasta and candy for a party.

They took a boat ride to Hawaii, the wind blowing in their hair, and made their way across a busy street to a cafe, where they searched through their pockets for a dollar bill, fearing they could mistakenly pull out a 10 instead. They never saw the park or Hawaii or the cars racing by.

And they never saw the woman—blind since she was 6—whose voice led them on the journey.

This is what it must be like to be blind. Or at least, that is what the exhibit "Dialogue in the Dark" aims to portray.

The exhibit is the latest in the United States designed to raise awareness of and sensitivity to issues of the disabled. It also is an example of how mass media—from art shows and novels to movies and reality television shows—can shape public policies for disabled people.

"This is a life-changing experience for many people," said Tom Zaller, vice president of exhibitions for the sponsor, Premier Exhibitions, which brought the "Titanic" exhibition to Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry in 2000 and 2002. "We see this as a platform to start conversations about diversity, not just blindness, but deafness, skin color and a lot of other things."

The concept was developed by Andreas Heinecke, who once worked for the Foundation for the Blind in Frankfurt, Germany. The exhibit has been seen by more than 6 million visitors in 20 countries since it opened in Germany in 1989. It made its U.S. debut in Atlanta in August and will travel to other cities. Zaller said Premier is talking to venues in Chicago that have the space to house the \$1 million exhibition.

While organizations for the disabled have praised "Dialogue in the Dark," they point out that not all publicity is necessarily good.

The National Federation for the Blind unsuccessfully sought to stop production of the upcoming film "Blindness," starring Julianne Moore, in which the world becomes chaotic and inhumane after a virus leaves people blind.

"Dining in the dark" events, where restaurant patrons are blindfolded to enhance the taste, smell and feel of food, began in Europe and are spreading to the United States.

At California's Opaque restaurants, guests are seated in a pitch-black dining room and served by blind or visually impaired waiters.

But such experiences are not always pleasant for people, advocates for the disabled said.

"Blindness is one of the greatest fears out there," said Chris Danielsen, spokesman for the National Federation for the Blind. "Studies show that only health conditions like AIDS and cancer are feared more than blindness, and those are terminal illnesses.

"The problem with blindfolding people is they can become more afraid. They figure, 'How can a blind person possibly do anything if I'm having so much trouble with it?' " he said. "They don't realize that blind people are used to doing things that way, and the misconceptions and stereotypes they have aren't true."

Gary Arnold, spokesman for Little People of America, an organization of short people, said that in the last decade, the entertainment industry has improved the way it portrays little people.

The popular TLC television program "Little People, Big World" introduced the Roloff family, which includes three dwarves, to America in 2006, depicting them as a typical family with challenges like everyone else, he said.

"Traditionally, little people were thought to be a comedic effect and put on display because they looked different and could attract a crowd like a freak show," said Arnold, a disabled-rights activist in Chicago. "There are many more opportunities for non-traditional roles now."

Another goal of "Dialogue in the Dark," organizers said, is to provide jobs for the disabled. The exhibit expects to hire and train up to 120 blind or visually impaired people to work as guides, developing skills that can help them find jobs once the exhibit moves on, according to Daniela Dimitrova, a master guide.

Dimitrova, 32, who is from Bulgaria, has traveled to 13 countries in seven years training other blind people to work in the exhibit. And while she has helped others become self-sufficient, she said, the experience has empowered her.

When she was 6, Dimitrova said, she woke up one morning and could not see. Doctors said she suffered from detached retinas. It has taken years for her and her family to come to terms with it, said Dimitrova, the soft-spoken guide who recently led a group on a tour of the Atlanta exhibit.

"This project has helped me realize that blindness is a fact of my life, just like the fact that I am a woman. It is something that I cannot change," she said, adding that she would be open to a retina transplant if it became available.

"If I see you one day, good. If I don't see you, also good. It is as simple as that."

dglanton@tribune.com

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