

I Found It!
by Rudy Yanuck

"I found it! I found my bubble! My bubble is back! I'M BACK!" These words resounded in my head as I scooted through the Promenade on the fifth deck of the Royal Caribbean Cruise line's 3rd largest ship, the Oasis of the Seas. I was invited to speak to the MS cruisers on the ship by the nonprofit organization MS Bright Spots of Hope. Together, we would spend 7 nights in the Caribbean having ports of call in the Bahamas, St Thomas, and St Maarten before returning to Port Canaveral, Florida.

My "bubble" or "joy bubble", is how my mom and her two sisters described me as a little boy - a term they used to depict the pure effervescent joy and happiness I showed for everything. However, as I grew out of childhood and my teen years, my "bubble" began to shrink. With the accumulating responsibilities and stresses of adulthood, it kept getting smaller and smaller until it felt lost forever. Thankfully, on the cruise, I discovered I was wrong. It was still there inside of me, waiting to be nurtured and given room to grow.

Upon boarding the ship the afternoon of March 5, 2017, I immediately felt the stress and worries from the outside world begin to melt away. The weight on my shoulders gifted me by life began to lighten. As I scooted further into the ship a few of the veteran MS cruisers and a couple of freshmen MS cruisers greeted me. I soon began to experience myself among comrades in arms, among old friends I had never met. I felt at home.

In addition to fantastic ports of call, we had exciting creative arts activities sponsored by MS Bright Spots of Hope: ceramic tile decorating, watercolor painting, and bracelet making. Also, talks were given by Brandi Johns, Mary Ellen Ziliak and her husband Roger, Dennis Tooley, and myself at sessions throughout the week. And finally, we had the most memorable closing event, "MS Evening of Hope" featuring myself as one of the speakers and sponsored by Bright Spots. I was also awed by Dennis who gave us an excellent lesson on how to handle, with grace and acceptance, the obstacles and knuckleballs MS presents. His unexpected temporarily loss of vision did not keep him from giving his presentation. It was truly humbling and unbelievable.

So many moments and events of the cruise were truly memorable, like the Tuesday night Hoedown costume party where those of us in scooters and wheelchairs learned line dancing.

One particular incident, however, stands out for me. While sitting outside a restaurant, on the Promenade deck, sharing MS and the military horror sagas with another military Veteran cruiser, an attractive blonde cruiser, whom I had noticed on several occasions earlier in the week, walked by the table at which we were sitting. She turned around, walked over to our table, and sat down. She told me how much she enjoyed my previous night's talk at the MS Evening of Hope. She then began to share with me a few of the difficulties and pains that multiple sclerosis has brought into her life. She shared with me the feelings of isolation, loneliness, aloneness, and abandonment she deals with thanks to multiple sclerosis. She talked about how her friends slowly began distancing themselves from her. She shared about the social activities she used to attend, to which she no longer gets invited. As she shared, a tear began slowly sliding down her left cheek. Soon it was joined by another, and another, and another, until tears were freely, silently, flowing down both cheeks. I felt her pain. I remembered my own similar experiences early on in my journey with MS. I shared with her. I told her the one good thing to come from all of this is that one really gets to know who is a true friend. Who will stick by. She then echoed

thoughts that had been on my mind about the cruise during the past week. She felt grateful for the cruise because it let her know she was not alone. She was not a “freak”. Thanks to this cruise, she felt part of a family.

Nearly a month after the cruise, one night while brushing my teeth, I had a realization that stopped me abruptly, and made me sit back and really think. What struck me for the first time was I had probably been the most physically disabled person in our group of cruisers, likely, the most physically disabled person on the entire ship. Yet, not once during the cruise did I think about, or even feel my disabilities. I felt like I could, and did, do anything and everything I wanted. For that entire week I was just "Rudy", and not the "disabled guy in a red scooter". I felt completely at ease with my surroundings and my body, not once feeling the least bit disabled. I felt at home, part of a family.

Friends, that sentiment explains why this cruise activity is so important, so critical, for the well-being and vitality of us prisoners of multiple sclerosis. I rolled up onto the Oasis of the Seas, an individual with multiple sclerosis. Quickly, I found myself part of a community. By the time I disembarked the ship on March 12, 2017, I felt part of a close knit family. I discovered my bubble had not disappeared. It still was within me, only dormant, waiting for the opportunity to flourish again. I found it!

If I were to sum up the cruise in one word, I would have to quote Barney Stinson, character on the CBS romantic comedy sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (google it), “It was LEGEN..... wait for it....DARY. LEGENDARY!”