

# 'Dialog in the Dark' exhibit simulates blindness

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ATLANTA - I don't like the dark, and the closest I've come to being blind is taking off my glasses. But what I'm about to experience goes far beyond my astigmatism, and I expect it will widen my myopic world view.

I'm standing at the threshold of "Dialog in the Dark," a new exhibit making its American debut at the Atlantic Station Exhibition Center in midtown Atlanta. The idea and concept was developed in 1988 by German Andreas Heinecke, who worked for the Foundation for the Blind in Frankfurt and created "Dialog" to increase tolerance, respect and understanding among people with sight and those without.

To date, the show has toured more than 20 countries and has drawn more than 5 million visitors worldwide.

At the end, I'm supposed to be able to "see without sight" and "gain a greater appreciation of the power of communication and the abilities of others," according to the organizers.

Intrigued by the concept, I'm still skeptical. Could an hour of blindness open my eyes?

Four of us begin the exhibit holding our canes and having some reservations about what to expect. We enter a room lined with plastic cubes that serve as both seating and the only light source. The space is meant to immerse us slowly into total darkness.

A voice overhead speaks calmly over soothing music, reminding us of our other four senses, which we will need for the next hour as we navigate the show. As the voice attempts to comfort us, the cubes grow dimmer and dimmer.

Within moments, the room is pitch black and completely transformed. It's much darker than I'm used to - much scarier than being alone at night in an unfamiliar room or on a dark, empty road. I am immediately aware of how dependent I am on my eyes; though no one has left the room, I feel alone and nervous. I grip my cane and wait for instructions.

We are directed to black boxes to the right of our chairs. Inside are several objects we are to identify using our other senses. It's a relaxing exercise. Right away, I can feel the soft petals of a wildflower, I can smell coffee beans, I can touch a group of fabric swatches. Maybe my eyes don't need to be the crutch I thought they were.

Our guide, Liram Frank, now enters the room and introduces himself. It's hard to tell

what his accent is. Eastern Europe? The Middle East? But his voice is friendly, warm, and gives me something on which to focus. It ushers us through the first door and into our journey.

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The ground is soft, uneven. It's unsettling. Is it grass? Moss? I can't be sure, but the guide was right: My slender, metal cane has quickly become my best friend. Its thin strap hangs loosely from my wrist, an extension of my body. It is how I first experience my new environment.

I can hear the others around me, but no one seems close enough to touch - that is, until I bump into one of them. Soon, we are no longer Arneisha, Jessica, Allison and Errin, our names are replaced with "Excuse Me," "I'm So Sorry," "Is That Your Foot?" and "Where Are You?"

Frank asks us, "What do you hear?"

Birds? Yes.

Crickets? Yes.

Butterflies? Yes. Wait - butterflies?

We laugh nervously at the trick question. And then, our first test: crossing a bridge. Directed only by the sound of Liram's voice and our canes, we feel our way across the wooden planks. As I put my hand on a rail, I can feel the water I thought I had heard earlier. A waterfall! I smile, recognizing something familiar.

I'm seeing a lot with my hands and feet now. A trash can. A bench. The room is a park! Another smile. Just as I get my bearings, we're off to the next room.

I am feeling my way along the left wall when I think I touch a blanket, then a towel and then an oven mitt. A kitchen? I feel cooking utensils, then I hear a voice overhead: "Price check on aisle three."

A grocery store. I didn't see that one coming.

Suddenly, oranges!

Each sensory victory is making me more confident. I can feel my eyes stop trying to focus.

I get so caught up in feeling my way through the aisles that I don't notice that it's been a while since I bumped into anyone. Someone calls my name, "Where Are You?"

"I'm here," I respond, and then realize that "here" probably doesn't mean much.

I fumble down the aisle, nervous and frustrated that I've lost the group. Out of the darkness, I feel a hand on my arm. I am being grabbed by a stranger and I feel safe.

Another voice pulls us into the next room. It belongs to Georgeo Vickers, and he's singing. Anxiety gives way to anticipation. What new adventure awaits?

I can hear seagulls. Feeling my way, I touch rope. We're on a pier, about to board a boat. One by one, we leave shore and take a seat on deck. I'm not as hesitant now, and I pat the wooden bench to tell "Is That Your Foot?" to sit next to me.

The boat rocks and I instinctively close my eyes. I'm experiencing the ocean in a new way, not transfixed by the sight of crashing waves, but enchanted by the rhythm, the sound of seagulls flying overhead. We merrily sing a few rounds of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" before reaching shore.

My good mood is interrupted at our next stop. I can hear a bus and my cane hits a metal pole. We're on a city street, and if I really were blind, I'm sure this would be one of my fears. Our guide Frank tells us that we'll have to cross on our own, without tripping on the curb or stepping into traffic. I grip my metal sidekick and tap the sidewalk until I hit something. A parked car.

I touch with my toe, feeling for the curb and step down. Atlantans can be hostile to sighted people at rush hour, so I want to get this right. Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap. I move deliberately but try not to be slow. I find the curb on the other side, step back onto the sidewalk and exhale.

We finally reach the last stop - a bar. I order a Diet Coke, but I forget that I'm blind and need to gesture for the bottle. "I'm here," I say, and tap the ground with my cane. Mission accomplished. I get my drink.

Our group walks over to a booth to sit down with our drinks and discuss the hour that seems to have flown by. I can't see anyone, but I can feel everyone's presence around me. I can hear people smiling. No one feels like a stranger, and I trust them as much as I do my cane.

Our guides are especially interested in what we have to say. For them, this is not just an exhibit; it's their life. They are blind, and among the more than 5,000 people who are blind or visually impaired who have worked with "Dialog" exhibitions around the world.

I am filled with questions, feeling sheepish and foolish at my curiosity - or naivete: How do you know when to wake up in the morning without the sun? How do you make phone calls? Can you use the computer?

I can almost feel Vickers looking in my direction as he tells me something someone once

told him: "It is not blindness that is the disability. It is fear."

Fear of the unknown, of what we cannot see, is indeed a scary thing, and I recognize for the first time how right he is. We leave the room and enter a corridor that gradually reintroduces us to the light.

I emerge squinting and probably more than a little relieved, but determined to see the world with new eyes.

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"Dialog in the Dark" opened Aug. 30 and runs through Feb. 15 at the Atlantic Station Exhibition Center in midtown Atlanta.