

## **Incident in the apartment parking lot**

By Aimee Headrick

It was about 11:30 pm and I had just gotten home from visiting with friends. When I pulled into my parking spot, I glanced around to make sure there wasn't anyone just hanging out near the buildings or near the surrounding cars. I noticed a man walking in the lot but he was keeping a constant pace and seemed to have a destination so I found him non-threatening. I grabbed my purse and keys, got out of the truck, and locked the door. As soon as I had shut the door, I looked up to see the man had changed his course slightly and was now walking toward me. I stayed next to my truck and we made eye contact. In an authoritative manner, and with as much voice projection as possible (just below a hollering voice) I said "Sir you need to stop coming towards me." He slowed his pace and I said again "Sir you need to stop walking toward me and go the other way". With this, he stopped where he was (which was about 15- 20 feet away). He said, "I just want to know if you have a plastic bag, mine's broken and my stuff is falling everywhere." I replied "Sir you need to turn around and walk the other way". "OK" he replied, "I will, but do you have a bag I can have?" "No" I replied. "But my stuff is falling everywhere" he repeated. "I'm sorry your stuff is falling everywhere. You need to go to your apartment and get yourself a bag" I said. "But I live a couple of miles away" was his response. Still in an authoritative manner I replied "Sir you shouldn't be approaching women in the parking lot when it is late at night." "I know" he said. "It's just that I need a bag". With that, I repeated my original statement "Sir I don't have a bag and you need to turn around and walk the other way." He stood there a few seconds looking at me. I repeated again "sir you need to turn around and walk the other way". With that, he said "OK. I didn't mean anything. I'm walking away now." He took a few steps backward then turned

around and kept walking. I took that opportunity to head for my apartment. He continued to shout as he was walking "I'm not following you....I'm walking the other way now....". When I reached my apartment I called security and told them what had happened. My hope is that they found the man and addressed the issue.

So I discovered that night that when you're in a situation like that, there are the things you are doing physically then there are the things that are going through your head as you try to sort out the situation. When I first noticed the man was walking toward me, and the distance was closing fast, my reflexive reaction was to tell him to stop coming toward me. I don't know how authoritative my first sentence was but the minute I got it out, I remembered that I needed to talk as loudly as possible so that if there was anyone sitting on their porches or if anyone had their windows open they would be drawn to the commotion. The next thing I thought was "crap, I think my pepper spray is at the bottom of my purse...or is it in my other bag?" Either way, I wasn't willing to break eye contact to go fumbling through my purse. So, I just stood there facing him. I'm not sure why I just stood there - but I did. When he stopped at my command I felt surprised like "wow, that worked!" At some point as I listened to the man's speech and picked up on what seemed like an odd request, I wondered if the man had a disability. Maybe he was a simple man who didn't know better than to approach a woman in the parking lot. (It's amazing how much you can think about when you are in a situation like that. It's like your body and your mouth are carrying on some separate duty and your mind is sizing up and trying to make sense of the situation.) When I came to the realization that this man might be a man with a mental handicap I felt my manner change. I almost offered to look for a bag in my truck. Because I work with people who have disabilities, it was difficult to

separate the compassion I wanted to feel for the man from the safety I needed to insure myself. I pictured myself turning around and rummaging for a bag and having to take my eyes off the man. I decided that was not a good choice. At this point I felt I had control of the situation and by turning my back on the man and giving in to his request for a bag, I would be giving the control to him. I had no choice but to be firm and demand that the man leave.

Later in my apartment I had time to reflect on what had happened. I realized that most of my initial response was automatic and that, had I not heard several stories regarding how to handle a situation like that, I might not have handled it the correct way. I also realized that yes, the man could have been handicapped or he could have been a man pretending to be mentally slow so as to gain my sympathy and so I would underestimate the current level of danger. The truth was, I just didn't know – and I will never know. I also recalled after the fact that less than 5 miles from my home, there had been three minor assaults on women and a fourth assault that had left the woman physically injured. None of this entered my mind when I was outside faced with the man. Reflecting on the situation was one of the most important things I could have done. I realized how quickly a situation can present itself. I realized the importance of being aware of the situation as it is unfolding. Most importantly I realized that I am capable of remaining calm and thinking on my feet in a situation like that. I also realized the power of confidence and body language. It was a priceless lesson – one that will not be forgotten.