

A Call to Action

From the www.disabilityisnatural.com E-Newsletter by Benjamin Snow

I'm a 23-year-old college student with big dreams for my life! I also have cerebral palsy, and I use a power wheelchair and other assistive technology devices. I want to get through college and make a difference in the world, I like to stay up late and sleep in, and—well, I'm just a regular person. But you wouldn't know that by how some people behave.

During a recent visit with one of my grandmothers, we ate several meals in her retirement community, and were joined by my grandma's friends. At lunch in the "deli," an older gentleman and I had enjoyed a great discussion about today's politics. As we hurried off to another activity, the man asked, "By the way, how long have you been incapacitated?" I *really* wanted to stay and have a *lengthy* conversation about his choice of words—I *am not* "incapacitated"—but there was no time, so I simply replied that I was *born* with cerebral palsy.

At another meal with my grandma and her friends, the dining room hostess passed out menus to everyone except me. I was busy talking and didn't notice this until I heard my mom say, "He needs a menu, too." Did the hostess presume I couldn't read, or did she think someone else was in charge of what I eat? A few minutes later, when the server came to take our orders, she asked my mom, "What does he want?" My mom said, "I don't know; you'll have to ask him." The server *did* speak to me then, but amazingly, she seemed to "forget" several other times, so my mom and I both reminded her to speak directly to me.

Why does this happen? I don't want to believe that people are intentionally prejudicial or cruel. It seems, instead, it's a result of ignorance. Because people with disabilities have, historically, been "hidden away" behind the walls of segregated environments and/or have not participated in the mainstream of society for whatever reasons, many people *without* disabilities have had little or no social interactions with them, so

when they do, it seems they simply don't know what to do or how to act!

After the events at my grandmother's, my mom and dad and I talked about these situations. My mom reminded me of similar things that have occurred throughout my life—like when I was very young, sitting in my wheelchair, minding my own business, and people asked my mom, "Can he talk?" (Why would they assume I couldn't?) She had more stories like that: perfect strangers who tried to hug me, pray over me, and/or give me money, as if I was a refugee from the Jerry Lewis Telethon! These actions seem to be the result of pity. At the other extreme are people, like the ones at my grandmother's, who ignored me. And there have been lots and lots and lots of stares, too. (My mom says she could write another book just about this stuff!)

Yes, it must be ignorance, the same kind of ignorance that people of color, women, and members of other so-called minority groups have experienced. The Civil Rights, Women's, and other Movements helped to reduce that ignorance, as people from these groups took their rightful places in schools, at lunch counters, on buses, in the workforce, and other settings in their communities.

It seems the solution to reducing ignorance about people with disabilities is the same. So this is a **CALL TO ACTION** to children and adults with disabilities: *get out there and take your rightful place in society!* The sooner more of us are out there, the more opportunities we have to educate others—*simply through our physical presence*—and the sooner others will learn that people with disabilities are regular, normal, ordinary people, too!

P.S. For proactive strategies on handling awkward situations, see "Humor to the Rescue: What Do You Say When...?" and "Why Do We Apologize?" on our family's website, www.disabilityisnatural.com.