

A personal word....

More than likely, people with disabilities have existed since the dawn of time. The old saying, "Only the strong survive", could probably shed some light on what may have happened to them during the days of the cave man, for example. Today, we have no way of knowing what may have happened to those born with birth defects or who survived traumatic accidents.

Many primitive societies had to stay on the move to keep ahead of the seasons or find sources of food. Sometimes, building whole new communities each time they settled. Anyone who was unable to produce or keep up, was simply left behind to die. Yet in other situations, those with mental disabilities were seen as 'special'. It was thought that they were possessed by some kind of spirits, good or evil. They were feared enough to be cast out of the communities they were born into, and feared too much to be killed even by their enemies. They were just left to wander and fend for themselves.

Later on in history, people with disabilities became looked upon as the ugly side of society. In some areas, it was actually illegal for them to be seen on the streets¹. In other areas, having such a person in the family was believed to be a sign of weakness in the bloodline. It was felt that something was wrong with you. As a result of that, people were ashamed of it. They began to hide these individuals in a closet or basement for their entire lives. Or as soon as they were born, the individual was put in some kind of home and never talked about. I, personally came across one of these situations only five years ago. In short, people with disabilities were not thought of as productive, or capable or as a benefit to society.

It wasn't until about 1917, that the first law was passed that would begin to speak to the rights of people with disabilities. It was the Rehabilitation Act of that year, and it came in answer to the needs of veterans who had come back from the war with disabilities. Because of what they lost while fighting for their country, those individuals earned the right to be retrained. Over the years, other disabled individuals benefited, and the fight for their rights was finally begun.

In 1973, there a law was passed called the Re-authorization of the Rehabilitation Act. It became known as the Rehab Act of 1973. It was over due, and it was a big deal for the community of persons with disabilities. Although it had certain limitations and restrictions, it was an acknowledgment by the federal government that all people with disabilities had rights. In the areas of employment, education, housing and so on, people with disabilities finally had rights.

But before we go on, let's look at some of the myths that have existed about people with disabilities. We are said to be 'brave' and 'courageous'. I can't tell you how many times I've heard, "I really admire you!" or "You are such an inspiration!" Believe me, it has nothing to do with any of those things. It's simply making adjustments to a lifestyle. All of you who think you couldn't do it, take my word for it, you would if you had to. Another myth. -People who use wheelchairs are ill. - That probably got started because of the association of wheelchairs with hospitals. Most people who use wheelchairs do not have an ongoing or terminal illness. How about this one? -People with disabilities can't have sex.- Not true Howard! We laugh, we cry, we shop, we drive, we work, we play and we have sex. We do everything everyone else does. Maybe some of us don't do some things, but then again, maybe some of you don't either. One more myth that some people believe. -There is nothing

one person can do to eliminate barriers.- I'm here to tell you there is nothing further from the truth. You see, the biggest barrier we face, is attitude. Often, people are afraid of us because they don't understand us. They're afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing in front of us. They feel inconvenienced if the bus takes a little longer picking us up at the bus stop. They feel it's alright, to park in a handicapped parking spot, just for a minute. Once attitudes truly change, everything else will fall into place,

Obviously, things have already begun to change, but there is still more that we can all do. The first thing you can do is think of people with disabilities, as people first. The disability is something that happens to come along with them. Then, try changing your language. Words and labels have a way of creating an expectation, and if you expect something from someone, that's what you'll get. The words that have traditionally been used to describe us are negative. Think of the word - invalid. If you change the inflection to in-valid, you can see how that term takes away from any positive features the individual may have. We've been called victims. This gives the impression of powerlessness and doesn't consider the abilities a person might have. The word normal as a comparison, suggests that the disabled person is abnormal, and should be pitied. Try saying "He's a person with a disability" or "She's a wheelchair user" this way, you emphasize the person first and the situation afterwards.

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¹ It happens today, all over California, planning commissions and City Councils actually pass ordinances prohibiting residents of shelters and housing for people with disabilities from being out on the street.