



Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month: A Time to Reflect

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Since 1987, when President Ronald Reagan declared March to be “Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month,” this has been a time to celebrate progress and recognize the remaining challenges facing those with special needs.

One of the biggest victories has been the increased involvement of individuals with disabilities in mainstream life. I can remember when friends of my grandparents’ generation were sharply criticized for refusing to institutionalize a child with severe disabilities. While decades of activism by parent advocates have since resulted in deinstitutionalization and increased community-based services, those services are fragmented. Just figuring out what’s available—which differs dramatically by state—takes time and energy. Then begins the process of navigating government bureaucracies. As a result, exhausted and vulnerable families often fail to get all the services to which their loved ones are entitled.

As a young child, I had no opportunity to interact with individuals of any age who had special needs. Then, as a teen, I spent several summers as a counselor for a camp for kids with muscular dystrophy, and it was eye-opening. We were close to each other in age, and the line between counselors and campers was blurred. We were really just a bunch of kids hanging out. We became friends, and it changed my life. It felt magical.

Today, students of all abilities routinely share classrooms. Actors with disabilities are featured in award-winning TV shows and movies. Dolls with disabilities teach children about accepting differences.

And yet, [bullying has reached epidemic levels](#). The behavioral or physical differences of young people with disabilities are too often targeted by classmates who are themselves struggling with the insecurities of childhood and adolescence. The “r” word is still casually, and cruelly, used.

Everyone deserves an opportunity to reach their personal potential. Each of us is unique, with our own mix of abilities and disabilities. There’s a lot more educating to be done before we’re able to eradicate intolerance, and the earlier that children begin to learn about—and accept—differences, the better.

During Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, let's pause to consider the ways—large and small—that we can work each day to eliminate the barriers that continue to impede individuals with special needs as they work to build lives that are independent and fulfilling.

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