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Performing in the Wind

Donna R. Walton
1900 Columbia Pike Apt. 307
Arlington, Va 22204
703-920-6086
E-MAIL:Doctorwalton@aol.com

As a young girl growing up in the nation's capital, I dreamed of being a singer, a dancer, or another type of great performer. Facing crowds fed my soul. However, fate had other plans. In 1976, at the age of eighteen, I was diagnosed with a potentially fatal form of bone cancer called osteogenic sarcoma. After a desperate fight with the cancer, my left leg was amputated above the knee. My initial dreams were obviously shattered. I believed that I was stripped of all "normalcy." To a teen, normalcy is such activities as taking a simple walk to class, participating in a sport, or dancing. Not as obvious, but even more devastating is the adjustment to the emotional and attitudinal changes in self and the world around.

My pursuit of higher education has created its own set of obstacles and as a result my attitude and approach to the barriers have altered with each encounter. I began my college career at a university in Washington, D.C. After teaching for several years, I pursued my Master's degree at a university located in Upstate New York. Currently I am a doctoral student in Rehabilitation Counseling & Leadership at university situated in the urban center Washington, D.C. On every level of education, I have faced two primary challenges in my pursuit of higher learning. The first, and perhaps most obvious, given my disability, are physical barriers; the other, deeply entrenched within society's psyche are attitudinal barriers.

I was a sophomore in college when my leg was amputated. After the amputation, I was forced to face the lack of internal systems in place to accommodate my disability. At the time, many buildings on campus were not entirely accessible. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act 1973 was in effect, but not necessarily enforced. Some classrooms were located on the third floor, which required that I take the stairs as there were few elevators.

Given that my leg was amputated shortly after adolescence, I still had the mindset and desire to fit in and try not to be different. Having to negotiate the stairs was embarrassing as I was slow and thus naturally drew attention.

The ensuing comments demonstrated the second and arguably most dominant obstacle, which were attitudinal barriers. Classmates often sighed and pushed to get by the "handicapped girl." The comments and attitudes acted as injuries throughout the day. Each sigh reminded me that I did, in fact, have a severe disability. The injuries were stressful and painful, but did not keep me from going to class and pursuing my dreams in higher education. Physical challenges are often isolated to buildings and parking spaces. Attitudinal barriers arise from a lack of awareness and sensitivity and are even more difficult to go beyond.

The majority of the time my disability is masked and disguised with my prosthesis. This, in some ways, adds to stress. While in undergraduate school, I found myself constantly accommodating rather than demanding change. I did not write or talk about my disability in undergraduate school because I was actually trying to hide the fact that I was somehow different. I wanted to "be normal," to fit in with my peers. When I was referred to as the "girl with the handicap" I felt like a shriveled up flower. I attempted to surround myself with people who did not draw attention to my disability.

Now, however, I want to draw attention in order to educate. Because I used crutches in the early stages of my undergraduate experience, before graduating to a cane, I felt less mobile and did not participate in events that put me into public. The once aspiring performer began to withdraw from the public that I once craved. The social dimension of college offered a rude awakening that I was different. It was difficult enough to lose my leg, but the after effects of the sneers and stares served as a constant reminder in the course of my academic journey.

Through the years and on different campuses, I have learned to acknowledge attitudinal barriers and educate others about them as often as possible. However, even today, accessibility is still an issue. As a doctoral student, a significant obstacle to my pursuit of higher education is parking. A person with a disability, who needs a parking space close to class, must pay for an expensive parking permit. As a student this is not always economically feasible.

The underlying issue of lack of awareness and internal systems to accommodate individuals with disabilities as is evidenced on my college campus is still a reality. Because of the current system I have to go to class an hour early to wait for a parking space to open near my building. Another obstacle in accessing resources for class is the need to use a freight elevator to enter the bookstore which is located on the lower level of the building. This serves an another hindrance to equal access. When I sit in class, I may not appear different, but the route and barriers along the way to the classroom are taxing and draining.

What I have experienced on every level of higher education is that if you do not ask for accommodations, provisions will not be made. There appears to be a general level of apathy on the part of professors and fellow students when confronting students with disabilities. As mentioned, navigating to class, even when the weather is cooperative and my residual limb fits the prosthesis perfectly, can be problematic due to institutional barriers. On the days of inclement weather, negotiating to class can be nearly impossible because even though the sidewalks are clear, the curbsides are totally inaccessible. Physical hazards such as large puddles of water, snow, or ice can make navigating to class impossible. I have never had a provision of options made available to me in case I was unable to attend class. Because my disability is masked by the prosthesis, this disability often does not get respect. With time, however, I learned to demand respect. I am aware that people are often uncomfortable talking about disabilities. Now, I educate and intentionally create dialogue about my disability to help create awareness and understanding.

We live in a society that is youth centered, body beautiful and ability oriented. When I began my undergraduate education, before my amputation, I aspired to be a great performer. Before my amputation, I was socialized to believe that a woman's beauty was the sum of her body parts, that the clothes she wore dictated how sexy and beautiful she was, that looking good outweighed her intelligence, wisdom and spirituality. Naturally, I thought that my femininity was compromised and that my aspirations to become a world-renowned performer would certainly never come to fruition. Yet, deep down inside of me, there was a war stirring suggesting that although I walked with a limp, endured discrimination from classmates and confronted countless attitudinal barriers, I could never loose my courage and vision to champion for others who may not have the healthy dose of self-esteem with which I was blessed.

During undergraduate school, I took all the creativity and imagination I had vested in performing arts and transformed my talents to education. My stage became the classroom and children were my audience. In spite of the challenges, I knew that although I may not become a great performer, I could still be great!

The change from performing arts to education represented a deconstruction of my old self in order to reconstruct a new self. What I had to do was think about who I was and who I was not. I had to first say that I was an amputee. I had to now look at the truth and come to grips with the fact that I was not going to be able to live my life as I had for the past seventeen years. In essence, I had to reorganize my thoughts so that I could be able to have the strength and ultimately the power to live and thrive with my disability. My disability and I had to coexist. Because I knew that I did not want to live my life always moaning and bemoaning the fact that my leg was amputated, I decided that I must revel in the blessing with which I had been bestowed. The fact that I survived cancer was much greater than lamenting the loss of a limb.

Socializing with disabled students, friends, and colleagues has taught me a great deal about myself. It has also helped to reinforce the changes I made in my belief system about individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, through interactions, I have changed from seeing people with disabilities as mediocre contributors to outstanding individuals who add an essential ingredient to life-diversity. People with disabilities endow life with difference.

Now I exude a different kind of character than I did initially in undergraduate school. When I stand in a classroom or an elevator or subway and someone asks, "What is wrong with you?" or "How could an attractive, young woman have this happen," I use those opportunities to educate.

In 1990, with the American with Disabilities Act, I truly made a shift to education and advocacy, rather than continued accommodation. With ADA, I had substance and law to back me. However, I had a vision long before ADA was enacted to promote the human rights and dignity of people with disabilities. For more than a decade, I was involved with activities promoting equity for people with disabilities. It was my belief that if people with disabilities were empowered with belief that they can make a difference and a "can-do" spirit they could be successful in any endeavor. Since I knew from my own life experiences that the barriers which existed in our society and higher educational systems may be obstacles for others with disabilities, I believed that my courageous attitude and spirit could serve as a living testament; thus, borrowing from the words of Edward Kennedy, Jr., "If I could do this, I could do anything."

In 1986 between being fitted for a new prosthesis and enduring hours of rehabilitation to learn to walk, I worked tirelessly with home video equipment to produce a video tape which documented the myths and misconceptions of people with disabilities. My desire was to show this video to teachers, school principals, rehabilitation professionals and parents of children with disabilities in hopes of further educating them of the implications of disability. Because disability was not a central topic to social circles at the time, many balked at what I was trying to accomplish. Knowing the power of fear and ignorance, however, I was not deterred.

In 1995, I proposed and later consulted colleges and universities in Florida and Georgia about why and how they should plan and present a "Disability Awareness Day" at their respective institutions. As a result of my efforts I was asked to write, narrate and direct a video for the Disabled Student Services Department at a community college in Miami, Florida. With this, as well as another educational video I created in the interest of female amputees in particular, I was able to touch the lives of many.

Each physical examination that reveals the cancer has not returned, I live a bit more proudly, more boldly and truthfully as a woman with one leg. Each day I gain momentum. I transform the obstacles and defeatist attitudes I face in higher education and in daily life by channeling my energies toward championing the rights of those with disabilities and educating the non-disabled of the importance of a such a task. In an attempt to make those who are non-disabled more aware of the disabled community, I have offered disability awareness seminars to schools and employers. Also, believing strongly in the power of personal testimony, I have written articles that uncover social prejudice and attitudinal bias for national journals to consequently help young girls and women with disabilities confront their challenge(s) and inspire them to pick up the baton of empowerment and pass it on to others.

As a result of my management experience in vocational rehabilitation and system change, I have made a direct impact on job development and job placement for individuals with disabilities. In fact, my leadership in this area has led to an increase in the hiring of people with severe disabilities in both the public and private sectors of the Washington D.C. and local metropolitan areas. Furthermore, I have served as a motivational speaker at engagements to inspire and advocate on behalf of disabled persons. In essence, I distinguish for employers and others the differences between being disabled and enabled. Moreover, I fervently discuss the social and political reasons why people with disabilities will always be necessary contributors to the workforce.

Today, my studies focus on the public policies that affect the lives of persons with disabilities. My disability serves as an asset, rather than a liability. To this end, I founded an independent consulting practice that inspires and mobilizes change into action for individuals and businesses who employ persons with disabilities. The world is now my classroom. I deliver motivational messages to enliven diverse and special interest populations in educational and government stages as well as foundations and philanthropies. Indeed, my mission to champion the rights of disabled persons is a continuous one. My pre-amputation dreams of singing, dancing and performing have not been lost, only changed. Speaking on behalf of persons with disabilities has now become the stage on which I sing, dance and perform in the wind.