

Respect key to interacting with people with disabilities



Senior Advocate

Martha Shapiro

Guest columnist

QUESTION: How can I be sure that I am treating people with disabilities with respect? I always worry I will say the wrong thing.

ANSWER: I really appreciate your question and think it is always important to remind ourselves not to stereotype people with disabilities or make assumptions about them. I have a friend, Carol Leish, who is a motivational speaker on the topic of living with a disability and focusing on the strengths that people with disabilities have. I interviewed her to learn more about her perspective on how we can all be mindful to treat people with disabilities with respect.

Carol explained that she started motivational speaking years ago because she was tired of people making assumptions about her. She states, “Awareness is the first step to eradicating prejudice towards those with disabilities, like me. I like to say that: ‘We are all more similar than different.’”

On how she feels people with a disability are treated differently, Carol responded, “In general, I think that people with disabilities, like me, get treated as if they have more problems than they do.” Carol said one of her challenges affects her voice, and people may automatically assume that her intellect is affected. But she’s proud to say that she holds a master’s degree in education from CSU San Bernardino.

In my work at Senior Concerns, I often meet people with all types of disabilities, including physical and cognitive. I have learned from experience to always treat and speak to everyone the same way. You can certainly ask if they need

any accommodation but do not assume for them. Allow them or their care partner to direct you if anything different is needed.

Carol said she has challenges but wanted to dispel how they might be perceived.

“The first challenge that I can think of is that I fatigue easily due to having visual challenges,” she said. “Thus, I do not want people to assume I’m not interested in an event because of having to leave early. I also do not want people thinking that I am being lazy.”

Everyone deserves to be treated with the same respect.

“I would appreciate people knowing that even with physical and emotional challenges, I still have dreams, hopes and desires like everyone else,” Carol said.

The truth is that at some point in time we may all have a disability, even if it is temporary. Even older adults often get treated differently simply for their age

and how they look. Yet everyone has capabilities, ideas, contributions and feelings that deserve to be recognized.

“I would like to emphasize that I focus more on my capabilities than my disabilities. I also want to say that ‘we are all more similar than different,’” she said.

For further information, visit her website at www.capablecarol.com.

Carol is a great role model for how we should look to treat others and ask to be treated ourselves. She introduced me to a quote by Helen Keller that says, “The richness of human experience would lose something of rewarding joy if there were no limitations to overcome.”

Let us look at the community around us and see a richness of human experience that makes our community all the better.

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