

BreakingBarriers

everybody belongs everybody serves

ISSUE #79 FALL 2008

✠ A Ministry of Christian Reformed Disability Concerns

Theme

In this issue we focus on cerebral palsy. Our next issue will be a literary issue. If you live with a disability, please send us your poems, short stories, artwork, or photographs by November 5, 2008. Items submitted for the literary issue do not have to be about your disability. Our spring 2009 issue will focus on Down Syndrome. If you have Down Syndrome, or have a loved one with it, please tell us your story. Items can be sent to disabilityconcerns@crcna.org or see our physical address on page 2. Do not submit anything longer than 500 words; items may be edited for appropriateness and length.

The Difference of a Six String

Jake Moerdyk

The clock reads 6:00 AM as I stumble out the door of my bedroom. It's another Monday.

By seven-thirty I leave for my eight o'clock music history class. I usually need about fifteen minutes to walk there from my apartment, but it snowed last night, and the walks are not plowed. It will take me much longer.

I fumble around on the pavement. Without warning my feet come out from under me, and I fall onto my back, hitting my head on

the slushy, wet pavement. When I open my eyes, snow is falling into them, and I cannot move at first. I watch people walking by. They don't even lift their heads from their Ipods to help the guy lying on the ground in a puddle of water.

I roll over and get to my knees. As I try to stand I keep falling to my knees again. My hands have lost all feeling from the cold. Countless people pass by and barely even look at me as I finally struggle to my feet. I am soaked and cold. I try to make the best of it, keep a smile on my face, and make eye contact. But most look at me with apathy or disgust.

When I finally get to the building that I am going to, a student enters in front of me. He looks back at me, still fumbling through the icy conditions, and lets the door close in my face. I am a half-hour late to my class and sopping wet. In that half-hour I miss vital information about the upcoming midterm. I spend the rest of the day soaked and chilled to my bones.

The next day, the alarm goes off at 7:30 AM. I will be late for my eight o'clock creative writing class. I don't really care, because today will be a good day. I get to go to the recording studio! I rush through getting ready, grab my guitar, and walk out the door.

The weather is the same as yesterday. The sidewalks have not been plowed, but people make eye contact with me today. Heads nod. Girls smile at me without me even initiating eye contact.

When I reach the spot that I fell yesterday, I tread carefully but fall anyway. This time four people ask if I am okay, if I want them to call an ambulance, or if I need help getting up. I have them help me up.

When I get to my classroom building, another guy walks in just ahead of me. He looks back and holds the door for me as I haul my guitar through the door. He smiles at me and walks away.

Once inside the building I think about yesterday and today. I wonder what was different about peoples' attitudes today. Maybe they were just in better moods, but then I look down at what is in my hand and say, "What a difference a six string makes."

Thank God for Mentors

Robyn Saylor

As a Christian with cerebral palsy, I have spent my whole life trying to find a place in God's world. I wanted to be with people and participate in activities with others. Many times, there was no difficulty in feeling included in the same life that everyone else experienced. As an active member of Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., I became involved with almost all of the programs offered to my age group. For this I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my parents, ministers, and fellow congregant members. Central has been relatively progressive in affirming most of the small and large tasks I wanted to undertake.

My parents, being my first mentors, insisted that I use the talents that God has given me to the fullest extent possible. Therefore, I spent well over twenty years obtaining a formal education. In 1985, I graduated from Western Theological Seminary with a Master of Divinity degree. During this time, my life was fairly goal-oriented and organized. I honestly believed I had the necessary skills to go into some form of ministry. As the years have passed, I have come to realize that it takes much more than books and classes to be educated. I have always had trouble

with organization and planning. Upon finishing my studies, I found myself with no immediate employment and no prospects for being able to support myself. Slowly, I began to realize that I was not necessarily going to find a job unless I could create something.

I had been praying for an answer. God's eventual response was to put Nancy Claus and me together. Nancy is a dynamic, powerful leader at Central who owns her own small business. She has worked with me tirelessly. Together we formed Sunrise Ministries which began January 2005. I serve as coordinator for the program. This endeavor came about because Nancy is my mentor. Without her strength, perseverance, and constant love, I literally would have lost much of my faith and will. Nancy has the gift of discernment and sensed when my legitimate calls for authentic justice and lasting change dwindle into fruitless complaining.

Nancy has moved on to finish her studies at Western Seminary. I still coordinate Sunrise Ministries on a volunteer basis, and I am looking forward to doing fundraising for the ministry in the future. Sunrise Ministries' programs have moved from Central Reformed Church to Trinity Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. As time has passed, Sunrise helped form a partnership between St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church and Trinity Reformed Church to begin a Friendship Ministries group. In the fall of 2008, we will be starting our first full year of Friendship at St. Anthony.

God does the work. I am thankful he has allowed me the privilege of having a mentor like Nancy to help me in it.

Letter

When we were driving home from a vacation in Texas this past summer, we entered Michigan and stopped at the welcome station. As I was sitting in the car, waiting for my husband, I was looking around and saw a wrought-iron archway. There was an inscription on it, but I found it a little hard to read. I'm sure most people don't see it at all. When I figured out what it said, I was really surprised. It said, "State of Michigan. Where recreational activities abound for people of all abilities." I was struck by the word "abilities." It was a statement I've never seen before. Interesting to me!!

Blessings,
Linda Cotton

Resources

Resource Centers on Cerebral Palsy:

United Cerebral Palsy: www.ucp.org

The American Academy for Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine: www.aacpdm.org

The Ontario Federation for Cerebral Palsy: www.ofcp.on.ca

Memoirs by People Living with Cerebral Palsy:

I'll Do It Myself, by Glenda Watson Hyatt. Hyatt also posts a blog at www.doitmyselfblog.com.

Under the Eye of the Clock, by Christopher Nolan. Tidbit: Rock band U2, who attended school with Nolan, wrote their song "Miracle Drug" (from How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb) about him.

Movie:

My Left Foot. The story of Christy Brown's early years living with cerebral palsy. The 1989 film won the Academy Award for Best Actor (Daniel Day-Lewis) and Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Brenda Fricker). It was also nominated for Best Director, Best Picture, and Best Writing. It is based on Brown's 1954 autobiography of the same name.

Resource Center on Autism:

The Gray Center. In the last issue of Breaking Barriers we missed an important resource on autism. The Gray Center is a nonprofit organization which provides information and support about autism spectrum disorders through support groups, social coaching, workshops, a bookstore, free phone and email support, and a web site at www.thegraycenter.org.

Study Center:

The Christian Institute on Disability (CID). The CID is a new initiative of the Joni and Friends International Disability Center found online at www.joniandfriends.org/institute.php. The CID is offered in recognition of the current and increasing need for a biblically-based, theologically-sound perspective on disability issues for the Church and the larger society today. The CID provides education and training for those called to disability ministry by preparing them to evangelize, empower, and serve people with disabilities in the local church, para-church ministry, and various professional fields.

Health Corner

Introduction to Cerebral Palsy

Ann Kutudis-Kenien, Regional Disability Advocate for Classis Southeast U.S.

Cerebral palsy (CP) is an umbrella term used for a number of conditions that cause problems with voluntary movement. At a Disability Concerns Leadership Conference in Grand Rapids, I watched a film produced by Tim Harrington, who has CP. Tim authored the documentary film that teaches How to Talk to People with Disabilities. Tim's CP affects his speech, which is slurred and doesn't flow smoothly. Listeners who don't know him could wonder if he is intoxicated. Having multiple sclerosis and knowing that my speech slurs when I am fatigued, I identify with the misunderstandings persons with CP experience.

About two in every one thousand people in North America have CP. Unfortunately, the general population often believes that people who have CP also have cognitive impairments. Often this is not true. Kara is a dear friend of mine who has CP. She is now the rehabilitation counselor in the Disability Resource Center at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, Florida. We both had some difficulties with academia due to our own neurological deficits, but neither of us has a low IQ. Do not assume anything about a person's intelligence based on what you see.

Researchers are still not sure why people develop CP, but it happens either in early pregnancy or during or shortly after birth. Physicians group CP symptoms into several broad categories: spastic, ataxic, athetoid or dyskinetic, and mixed cerebral palsy.

CP symptoms are often subdivided further based on the parts of the body affected.

Because of the movement and communication difficulties often associated with CP, accurately assessing cognitive and other abilities is not always easy. Medications, physical therapy, and appropriate medical care all need to be considered when developing a plan for independent living for persons with CP.

Friendship Ministries Celebrates 25 Years

Friendship Ministries started when one family asked Christian Reformed Publications, “What materials do you have to nurture the spiritual growth of our son who has Down syndrome?” The publisher was empty-handed.

The problem was more complex than a lack of materials. Churches of every denomination were failing to embrace sisters and brothers with cognitive impairments and their families. For the last 25 years, Friendship Ministries has been working to share its mission with churches around the world: To share God’s love with people who have cognitive impairments and to enable them to become an active part of God’s family.

From the beginning, Friendship Ministries’ dream was that churches would fully embrace people with cognitive impairments and their families. Friendship’s most visible work has been helping churches start new Friendship groups and keeping existing groups vibrant and healthy. But they also consult with churches in other areas that are critical to full inclusion, such as including children in Sunday school, recognizing and using spiritual gifts, the process of church membership, and inclusive worship.

Today, Friendship groups exist in more than one thousand churches, more than fifty denominations, and more than twenty countries, both in English and Spanish. The Spanish-language ministry is called Ministerio Amistad.

To learn more about Friendship Ministries and Ministerio Amistad, visit their websites: www.friendship.org and www.ministerioamistad.org.

Meditation

Impressions

Heidi Dru Kortman, a writer who lives with Cerebral Palsy

Text: Psalm 119:73-80

“Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands...May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause; but I will meditate on your precepts” (vv. 73, 78).

Some passages are hard to live up to. First, I must give in and confess that God knows exactly what he is doing in the process of my life. It can be very difficult to admit that there could be a real purpose for my disability. “Everybody else” appears to have life much easier than I do.

As a very small “preemie” in 1957, I could have died immediately. I could have lost my sight. I could have cognitive impairment. By the grace of God, I have none of these things. I do have spastic cerebral palsy. My left leg is weaker than my right, and my left hand won’t type this devotional as fast as my right one will. It’s frustrating, and on some days, I do not consider this “gift”

something I've received from God's grace. It can be very hard to truly believe that "in faithfulness you have afflicted me" (v. 75).

God's laws are righteous, but on my own I cannot achieve a blameless attitude toward his law and make it my delight. It is easy to pray "May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause," but I do not naturally meditate on God's precepts instead of the disrespect I sometimes receive.

Our God has compassion. He solved our greatest problem by decreeing the death of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Christ arose and sent the Holy Spirit who lives in us and with us. His unfailing love and comfort make all God's promises our personal possessions. When we focus on this truth, instead of our awkward personal circumstances, we can be attractive despite the physical differences that draw so much other attention. "May those who fear you rejoice when they see me, for I have put my hope in your word...may those who fear you turn to me, those who understand your statutes" (vv. 74, 79).

Lord God, through belief in the life, saving death, and resurrection of Jesus, all your overwhelming promises are ours, and we plead that you remake us. Help us to make your will our delight. Mold our attitudes so that those who see us can rejoice. Amen.

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