



Kids As Self Advocates

## An Unknown Culture

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by [Christina Mills](#)

*Although this was originally written for a class, Christina Mills shares helpful information. She thinks that if more folks are aware of disability as a culture, they may be less likely to discriminate. Agree? Disagree? [Let us know!](#)*

Most people would not consider the thought of disability as a specific culture. In fact, most times when people hear about culture it is linked to a specific ethnic background. Debates on such topics of disability do not exist in the average class room. Debates of culture or ethnicity usually come down to the harsh treatment of how people other than those with disabilities were treated back in "those days." For instance, the people of Jewish heritage were persecuted by Hitler and his followers, or how Native Americans were forced to live on reservations, and how Japanese were put into concentration camps by the Americans during World War II. All of these facts exemplify cultural discrimination and are an appealing reality throughout our nation. Why does society choose to teach subjects such as these without including the culture of people with disabilities and how they too have faced discrimination? Most non-disabled people, do not think of people are unable to ponder the thought of people with disabilities having their own culture. Those people without disabilities hardly realize that being able to relate and feel accepted by others is an enormous privilege. People with disabilities have been excluded, stereotyped, and ridiculed by others since the beginning of recorded history and those biases continue to this day.

From the time I wake up in the morning till the time I go to bed at night it never fails that at least once during my day I am excluded by either an architectural barrier or by someone's lack of sensitivity. I would love to believe that most people are over the idea of people with disabilities being homebound or institutionalized these days, but somehow I end up thinking twice about my assumption when I come across a public place, such as a restaurant, that still does not have an elevator or ramp. In Anne Frank's essay, "The Diary of a Young Girl," she states: "Our freedom was strictly limited" (28). I can relate to this statement because freedom is also "strictly limited." The first time I began to feel this lack of freedom was when I was five years old and was put into an elementary school that only served children with disabilities. At that age I could not quite figure out why all the children I played with daily in my neighborhood, children who swapped Barbie's and shared secrets with me were without wheelchairs and walkers, yet all my schoolmates were similar to me. It was almost as if I was living in two different worlds throughout parts of my childhood.

It was not until the third grade did I realized I was different from my friends at home. In the essay, "From the Diary of a Young Girl," the author says: " Sometimes I believe that God wants to try me, both now and later on." At times I too believe that God is trying me. For example, in 1987 my Mother was constantly fighting with the local school board on getting me into public school. It took a year until the school was finally convinced that I was not a lawsuit waiting to happen. The Americans with Disabilities Act had not been passed yet, so my Mom had a lot of arguing to do. At first I thought that attending a public school would be a rewarding experience. After all, I would be able to share classes with friends in my neighborhood, eat lunch with people I had known all my life. Above all, from my eight year old perspective, I would be able to play the most popular game of all, foursquare. Shortly, I learned I was sorely mistaken after the first week of school. Instead of being treated equally like I had dreamed and as I had been at the all disabled school it was the exact

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opposite.

When I began attending the public school they made this adult lady walk around with me everywhere I went. She was called an attendant, but I called her my evil shadow. When my Mother got me into the school, she did not tell me that I would be excluded and treated differently from the rest of my classmates. For instance, I was not aloud to use the regular school restrooms because according to the principal, the nurse's office was much more suitable for my needs. I realized the idea of eating lunch with my playmates was merely a fantasy. Even more, when I was told I would have the choice of either eating in the nurse's office or the school library. Foursquare was definitely out of the picture, I was not even allowed on the playground. Exclusion has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember.

Stereotypes affect our society on a daily basis. While watching Oprah Winfrey late last year I heard a psychologist say that it was acceptable for people of African American heritage to be upset about how discrimination had been a part of their history. How is it okay for one culture to be upset about the way they have been treated verses another? Often, people with disabilities are belittled and looked upon as a terrible tragedy, as if they have nothing to live for or offer the world because of their disabilities. On a personal level, many people feel that I am unable to hold a full-time job, have a family, or be an active member of my community because of societal stereotypes. In July of this year, I was called for Jury Duty. When I arrived, I began going through the standard sign-in procedure and was quickly approached by a court house employee, who clearly believed that I was not capable of being a juror. Her exact words were, "Disabled people get medically excused from duty, you should have called first."

Often I have been told that I have a bad attitude because of my disability and that I am unhappy with way I am. In reality I feel that some people are uncomfortable with the fact that I am proud of the way I have lived my life thus far and sometimes I am angry. Angry that I seem to have to continuously educate people one-by-one on who people with disabilities are and deserve to be treated. I can recall going to a dance club in Downtown San Diego with friends with and without disabilities. When approaching the front door of Club 66 I can recall a bouncer asking my friend, Franky, who is a wheelchair user, the most profound question I had ever heard, "Did they let you out of the home tonight?" I was shocked by his questions and immediately wanted nothing more then to lash out at him, but instead, I took a subtle deep breath and said, "Not all people with disabilities live in an institution these days." Needless to say the bouncer was speechless. However, stereotypes are not the only challenges faced by those in the disability culture.

People with disabilities are also ridiculed daily regardless of success. In Toi Derricotte's essay, "The Black Notebooks," she paints a vivid picture by stating: "The only feeling of power one can possible have in a situation in which there is such a sudden feeling of powerlessness is to do something." The author is right by stating the only way to empower yourself is to "do something." While eating lunch in Mission Beach on a warm summer day I can recall my friend, Tim, who has been a triple amputee since birth, was waiting outside the restaurant doors for me and being approached by a man with a ten dollar bill. Without even saying a single word the strange man softly placed the ten dollar bill in Tim's nearly empty paper cup. Dismayed and disgusted by the mans gesture Tim was so shocked that he was unable to get the words out quick enough to educate the man on his wrong doing. This is not the first time a situation such as this one has happened to Tim or myself. On Halloween night at the age of thirteen I can remember trick-or-treating with my non-disabled friends and approaching a house where everyone but me got candy. Instead, the kind hearted lady at the door told me to wait one minute while she rushed into the house. After a minute or two the women was back with not only some candy, but a couple of one dollar bills as well.

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Society has taught people to believe that people with disabilities are unfortunate and on government funded programs. What people do not understand is that people with disabilities are constantly working their hardest to become employed and respected by their peers. Since the day I graduated from High School I have been employed either part-time or full-time by well-known community companies and organizations. During this time I have also been active in my community and attending school. It is astonishing each semester when I begin a new course and my professor automatically assumes that because of my disability I am unable to be a multi-task person. When I told my Anthropology professor last semester that I would be late one day because of work she said, "Oh wow, you work?" Did she expect me to be a person who sat around doing nothing all day simply because of my disability?

Clearly, disability is a cultures and is as important as other cultures taught in school. People with disabilities have been excluded, stereotyped, and ridiculed by others since the beginning of recorded history. By reading this essay I hope the reader will have become educated on the harsh discriminations that does not only face obvious cultures, but the unknown ones as well. People with disabilities have a right to know their history not to mention that all people should be educated on all cultures.

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