



Not So Different

When people lay aside their differences, what remains is a universal need for acceptance. Lacey Weisbrod, judged as different for most of her life, teaches us a thing or two about how alike we all really are.

At 4:00 a.m., Lacey Weisbrod feels her way out of bed and onto her mat for yoga or kickboxing. In the shower she reaches for the bar of soap sitting in its usual alcove on the left. She grabs for her towel and continues her morning ritual at the face bowl. Her toothbrush and paste stand at attention in their cup holder, ten finger-steps to her left. Her comb and hair band lie in the middle drawer where she left them last night. She runs the comb through her hair—left side, then right—then finds the kitchen, where she fixes a quick bite. Come afternoon, she sits near the door. The driver knocks. She’s expecting him. She walks down the stairs and slices the sidewalk into familiar yet carefully measured steps. She climbs the stairs onto the Special Transit System bus that takes her to Austin Community College, where she studies psychology. In early evening, Lacey returns to her apartment, rests her cane, and settles in for a few hours of reading in Braille.

EXPERIENCING THE DIFFERENCE

Lacey has always been completely and permanently sightless, and she embraces her blindness. “I am not different,” she says. “I just do things differently.”

Most people use their eyes to navigate from one place to another. Lacey uses her cane. Folks with eyesight read by looking at the printed page. Lacey reads by gliding her fingertips across a bumpy page of Braille. The tools are different, but blind people can be as capable as the sighted. Furthermore, those without sight have the same needs and long-

ings as sighted people; in truth, those who can see and those who cannot are more alike than different. However, Lacey’s unfortunate school experience drives her to want to help others. She also wants to teach people about relating to those with disabilities.

THE “REAL WORLD”

In middle school, Lacey’s greatest longing was for acceptance and friendship—a need shared by most teenagers. Middle school can feel like a war zone as adolescent kids fight for position on the popularity chain, maneuvering for other students’ approval. Lacey found school an alienating battlefield where no one protected her. Most kids shunned her—except for those who made fun of her and told her that her eyes looked weird. At lunchtime, she usually roamed the cafeteria feeling for a seat while trying not to drop her tray. “I would go to sit at a table and they would say, ‘Every chair is taken.’” Rarely did students offer to help or invite her to join them for lunch. “It was a very lonely time,” Jeannine, Lacey’s mother says. Lacey had very little positive interaction with other children—this, despite the fact that Lacey had distinguished herself as a musician. She learned to play classical piano by ear and achieved recognition in voice competitions.

Mainstreaming Lacey into the general school population was the advice Jeannine had received from school administrators. Children with physical and mental challenges needed to interact with their non-disabled peers; indoctrination into the “real world” was the theory. Jeannine wanted to do what was best for Lacey, yet she was watching her daughter ►

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Jeannine and Lacey

NOT SO DIFFERENT *from page 39*
waste away physically and emotionally. By the time Lacey turned 13, she was deeply depressed and had lost a frightening amount of weight from an already tiny frame. Jeannine needed an alternative solution.

HOPE IN SIGHT

Unexpectedly, Jeannine received a brochure from Texas School for the Blind. Finally, someone out there understood. She read a mother's testimony about how her son had been struggling in school but then thrived when she transferred him to Texas School for the Blind with other children like him. "I read the article to Lacey and she said, 'Mom, we need to do this.'"

Lacey, Jeannine, and Dad Randy interviewed the school administrators and nurses. The following week, Lacey began attending the school. The school required that Lacey learn to cook, wash clothes, and take care of her own hygiene. They also expected that she learn how to navigate between the buildings on campus. Her peers in the public school weren't required to learn these skills as part of their curriculum.

SEEING OTHERS WITH NEW EYES

Jeannine sometimes wonders if she lost an opportunity to teach others about the commonalities between those with handicaps and those without. Had she kept Lacey in public school, would the other students and adults have got-

ten to know Lacey better? Nevertheless, Jeannine finds opportunities to communicate such ideas now. She encourages parents to talk to their children about those with disabilities. "[Tell them to] take the challenge. Talk to someone with a disability," Jeannine urges.

Jeannine and Lacey share insights such as these about interacting with someone who is disabled:

It's okay to make eye contact with someone who has a disability. Shunning them or turning away can be hurtful. "I notice how people stare and then turn away [from Lacey]," Jeannine says. "It's okay to say, 'Hi, how are you?'"

If it appears that a disabled person needs assistance, it's okay to ask if you can help. If they don't need help, most will still appreciate the offer and politely say, "No thank you, I can do it."

Be patient in the checkout lane. It may take a person with a disability a little longer to swipe her debit card or sign her name. But they are often as capable as anyone else.

Intervene when you see a disabled person being bullied.

At 27, Lacey is taking psychology courses, hoping to become a counselor someday. "I am the female Dr. Phil," she giggles. Sometimes, you'll find Lacey keeping company with her mother at Jeannine's interior decorating store, Diva, on the Square.

"People who may seem different... are not. They have hearts and minds. They want social interactions. Let us have opportunities to speak to you. [There's] nothing more that a child wants than to fit in—not be neglected or picked on," Lacey says. Is that so different from everyone else? ■

