

Friendships, Connections and Relationships: It Starts With You!

By: Lorinda Gonzalez

One of the gems in life is building relationships with others. Creating friendships, romantic relationships and connecting with others creates opportunities for us to grow and truly enjoy our surroundings. As a person with a disability, I've had the great opportunity to network with others who are in one way or another tied into the disability community and equally as important relationships with people who have never met anyone with a disability before in their lives. I've found that creating relationships with a diverse group of people has broadened my horizons and brought zest to everyday life.

There are numerous ways to get to know people and create relationships. Whether it's simply smiling at someone at the train station or actively participating in a community event, opportunities to meet new people are endless.

Unfortunately, I've found that many individuals with disabilities fall into one of two limiting mindsets: A. I can only make friends and enter relationships with other disabled individuals because able-bodied people won't understand me or B. Since I don't want to be identified as a person with a disability, I must avoid people like myself and do my best to integrate with "normal" people.

In my opinion, both trains of thought are limiting and unrealistic. Instead, embracing and accepting one's physical condition, as a unique part of them is the first step in finding happiness. If you're not content in your own shoes – or wheels – how can you expect anyone else to accept you as you are? There is beauty in all of us, but it starts in within yourself.

I was raised to see myself as equal to any other person – with or without a disability – just with an extra accessory. My parents supported an active and mainstreamed lifestyle and insisted that I was included in every activity brought into my experience. Even though many times I had to do things differently than others, there has been nothing that with a little open-mindedness and adaptability that I couldn't do. This reality is something I am passionate about sharing with others.

Marilyn Monroe once said, "Give a girl the right shoes and she'll conquer the world." Instead of a pair of shoes, I was given four wheels, a brilliant mind and just enough boldness to see anything as possible. Experiencing love and true appreciation for life, having the support of loved ones and a deep sense of resilience can transition any barrier into a stepping-stone. Stay happy, live life fully, and open your eyes to the beauty around you!

To create lasting relationships, we must first break through the barriers of own mind, giving us inner confidence that in turn shines a light to the outside world. This in turn transitions the perception of one's disability from pity to simply a unique characteristic that exudes confidence and attracts long lasting and fulfilling connections with others.