

The View From Here

By: Justine Chichester

“They call me disabled. I called myself differently able.” – Muniba Mazari

I have recently been inspired by the LA Rollettes’ “Be Boundless” campaign. You may have seen it online. This group of beautiful ladies who dance, empower women and, oh yeah, all happen to be in wheelchairs, began their “Be Boundless” campaign after noticing how often they hear the term “wheelchair bound” and how they feel that they are anything but “bound” to their chairs. In their words, “Our goals, dreams, aspirations and abilities reach far outside just what we can do while sitting in our chairs. We. Are. Boundless.”

I couldn’t agree with them more. I hate the term “wheelchair bound.” After everything I’ve been through, there really isn’t much that bothers me these days, except for when I hear that term. It makes my skin crawl. I hear it on the news, I read it in magazines, I see it on social media. “Wheelchair bound” evokes this image of someone who is tied to their chair, which definitely does not describe me or anyone I know. It also implies someone who is weak or restricted in some way. I have to tell you this couldn’t be further from the case. My wheelchair is the means by which I get around; it doesn’t define who I am and it certainly does not restrict me from living my life.

I saw a comment online in response to the ladies’ “Be Boundless” campaign. Someone said, “It’s just a term. It’s no big deal. Get over it.” Therein lies the problem. The language we use matters. Using a term like “wheelchair bound” creates a stigma; a negative connotation regarding wheelchair users. For example, the conversation goes something like this, “Do you know Justine? Yes. I do. I heard she’s wheelchair bound.”

Some of the strongest people I’ve ever met roll through life. We have a story to tell, a lesson to be learned, and that enlightenment usually made us stronger then when we walked, instead of rolled. We have battled back from traumatic injuries, hospital beds, rehab facilities; learning how to do mundane tasks all over again. The list goes on and on. And they are usually the things most people take for granted every day. And yet here we are. Living our best life. On wheels.

It is empowering when I see ladies like the Rollettes group attempting to change the conversation. Showing all of us what it is truly like to wheel every day. So, I thought I could add my two cents to the conversation and suggest an alternative to the negative term, “wheelchair bound.” I think we can, and we should do better. The next time you find yourself describing someone like me, who rocks a chair, try this one out for size:

“Do you know Justine? Yes. I do. I heard she’s Wheelchair Strong.”