

Living with stigma from a person with a disability

By Amie Kupavits

My name is Amie. I am a person who has a disability and I have experienced stigma from people on several occasions.

I am a Rights Educator and a Peer Mentor. I am a very busy lady who receives 24 hours care every day. I appreciate the ladies who are my caregivers, and I show them my appreciation by taking them out sometimes.

There was a time that I took them to Olive Garden for a meal. The waiter looked at me up and down. Then poked my team leader and asked, "what is she ordering to eat?" As if I couldn't speak for myself. I cut my team leader off before she could speak. I said to the waiter, "I'm having a salad and bread sticks; and by-the-way I'm paying the bill, so bring it to me because I'm just like them. I have a job and I can pay the bill and decide what I want to eat."

The manager came over and asked if everything was okay. I told the manager the same thing. "I can pay the bill myself, therefore I want to be treated like everyone else." The caregivers laughed under their breath because they know me my personality. So, they were not surprised at my reaction. The waiter just looked at me and said, "okay madam we will do that."

When the manager came over and I told him what happened. I told the girls to let me handle this. I told him, "I always come in here and eat." He said "You are a frequent visitor and a frequent patron, and we like you. We like your personality, and we are sorry about what happened." I suggested to the manager that he might consider having a class on *How to Handle a Customers with a Disability*. He agreed. Since that time, I haven't had any more problems.

Other times, when I went to Macy's or Sam's Club with my caregiver, the salesperson would pass out samples and look over me. They would give the sample, such as perfume, to my caregiver but not to me. I would say, "I want one, too." They would respond "ok, ok", and give me a sample as well.

Sometimes people don't realize that we are just like them even though you may be in a wheelchair. Even if an individual is nonverbal, they can communicate. Just look them in the eye and see their expressions. People need to be more educated on how to treat people with disabilities. For instance, if you had an accident and couldn't talk or couldn't walk, think about how you would want to be treated.