Resources

Frequently Asked Questions

Legal Resources

Public Policy Resources

Reports & Publications

Blog Archive

JANUARY 7, 2020

Progression

by Sharon Ohmberger

Initially, I thought it was a unique experience, but the more I considered it, the more it occurred to me that this was just life:

I was sitting with my mother, recently turned 80. We were having lunch at a restaurant in a medium-sized town in northeast Nebraska. Mom experiences some memory issues. A man seated with his family across from us had two prosthetic hands. 15 minutes later, three women came in the front door, one of them using a white cane. After we'd received our food, a Ford pickup backed into the accessible parking space directly outside the window where we sat. The passenger got out, unfolded a wheelchair and took it around for the driver, who transferred into it to wheel into the restaurant. Everyone was there for the same thing: a good meal and probably some company and conversation.

A few months ago, we were working on captioning a video from the Inclusive Education Advocacy Institute that Disability Rights Nebraska hosted in June of 2016. One of the presenters was Cheryl Jorgensen, Ph.D., a consultant on Inclusive Education. There was a segment in that video I watched multiple times in the captioning process. Cheryl talked about a couple things that are relevant here: "All means all" and Universal Design. (Being an artist, I get pretty excited about things

with "design" in the title; it was just a bonus that I had to watch and re-watch these segments anyway to make sure the captions were correct.)

What struck me about the "All Means All" segment was the progression: initially, faculty working with Cheryl said, "OK, I really believe in inclusive education, but you can't mean children with Down Syndrome, do you?" Cheryl continues:

"A little later on in my career, when people in New Hampshire had already agreed with this idea that yes, students with Down syndrome could be included, they said "but you don't really mean Leslie" - Leslie is a student who, because of her particular disability label, gets in her classmates' personal space too closely and if her classmate happens to be eating something, Leslie will grab it and eat it. So people said, "not Leslie"…some years later, people are saying "okay, I get the kids with Down syndrome, I get the kids who may have a medical issue, but you don't really mean kids with Angelman syndrome – they clearly are some of the most disabled children in the world" and it continued as time passed… "…you don't mean students like Marika, who needs assistance to move pretty much every part of her body, or Charles, who uses his feet for everything…"

And yet, beyond anyone's reservations about including a person with a particular level of disability, it's becoming more and more common to see people with visible and invisible disabilities in school, in public, in the workforce, on TV and in the movies. While the film industry has a long way to go in terms of accuracy, nuance, and even just casting people with disabilities to play people with disabilities, awareness has grown. And with it, hopefully, increased levels of acceptance and inclusion.

Small design changes = big impact!

Think about this: most people probably don't even register the presence of the child seat in a grocery cart. That's just the little upper portion where you put the stuff you don't want to get jostled around. But there was a time before child seats when someone became aware that the women with small children, who were doing most of the shopping at that time, needed means to safely and easily include their children. That design has gone beyond being accepted to becoming something we often take for granted.

Even the interior design world has gotten ahold of the concept of Universal Design (see this series of articles from Elle Décor magazine), and the "friendliness" of its concepts will very likely become common and expected in new construction, like 36" doorways and levers instead of door-knobs. As disability advocate and design maven Xian Horn states in her Oct. 2019 interview with Elle Décor, "Accessibility is good practice, but it doesn't have to just look compliant. It can be beautiful and flawless just like any other design." Horn, herself, lives with cerebral palsy.

Here's my point: Disability is normal and the actions that are taken to make things more accessible to all people become normal, accepted, and then become the common expectation, over time. Ask any kid born after 1990 – self-opening and push-button grocery store doors have "always been around".

I understand we have a long way to go, and I also understand that, as a person without a disability, it's essential to continue to develop my own awareness of the barriers people face. In the meantime, I plan to do what I can to promote and support these movements – specifically inclusive education and universal design. I'm hoping that, in the end, we'll be asking ourselves why we got so bent out of shape about installing ramps, making work hours flexible and publishing materials in multiple formats - and any other actions we take to make life more accessible - when those very actions have the potential to benefit everyone.

Photo description: wheelchair-accessible kitchen sink

Sharon Ohmberger has been with Disability Rights Nebraska since 1998. She works to build support for and increase community awareness of disability rights and the work of the organization. Outside the office, Sharon is a potter who works by hand in red earthenware clay.