Many currant social attitudes create unnecessary barriers for people with disabilities, especially those with visible developmental disabilities. That became apparent to me after having worked with many people from that community. Over time and many interactions I started noticing those aspects of our society that I have not thought about before. This presented me with new challenges and an opportunity to explore some of our embedded and implicit ideas of disability.

We work at Frontier College with adults with developmental disabilities to help them improve their literacy and gain new social skills. Most of our students come to learn very basic language use and mathematical skills. The classes have started in September, and since then each and every student has maid a great progress on their goals. They are all enthusiastic to learn and they bring high energy to classes and continue to build social connections within the class and with the tutors. Even on the worst winter days, we almost always have a full class. That often made me wonder, why is such capable and eager to learn people wait until they are adults to come to school and learn. How would it be different if they were able to get this attention as children. One of my students “R” is working on building mathematical skills. In September we started with additions. The only way she was able to count is to draw figure sticks. If she was asked to add 6 + 7 She draws 6 stick, then she draws 7 sticks, then she adds them one by one. Now at the end of February, we are working on long multiplication with decimal points. All the students are adult, and since September, which is the time classes had started they have progressed a lot. They also, all come very enthusiastic to classes and even on the worst of winter days we usually have full classes. Despite many of the stuhave built confidence and comfort to socially interact with others.

Yet all of them have made recognizable progress since we started in September. They also have been building social skills and all of them have been eager to be at school. Most of the Students have been making their way to school even on the worst of winter days. They are always so happy and excited to be in class, I often wonder why they are all starting from very rudimentary levels. One of our students Kevork is in his sixties. He is learning basic reading and writing skills. He also is learning to use a computer. He is always in class on time. He is very enthusiastic and cheerful and he is very happy with everything new he learns. Why is someone like that who is able and eager to learn wait until his sixties to begin learning. It seems obvious to me that given an earlier opportunity to learn he would have liked that. It is possible that fifty years ago there was not enough awareness or attention paid to people with disability, but it does not seem to have changed enough today. The younger people usually are more advanced but not nearly enough given their apparent capacity to perform in class.

Adding to insufficiency of educational opportunities available to people with developmental disabilities, there is also insufficiency of work opportunities. Almost all of our students are unemployed with the exception of the ones working with the coffee shed and one student who got a job at the Cineplex theatre with help from the program. It is great to see the effort frontier college and their associates are doing to help de-marginalize people with developmental disability, but more has to be done. People perspectives and presumptions about disabilities have to change before we can seriously incorporate disability into the norm of society. Our students are often bullied and or socially avoided. People do not know how to interact with disability so they avoid it or worst attack it. Nikita is on the subway with her mom, when a drunk guy approach them at tells her mom: “I wish your daughter would disappear”. He walks away, but Nikita has not been able to get over the incident a month later, she is afraid to take the subway alone and she asks everyone if they think he would come after her or that she may walk up to him again. Joni is another student who is bullied even worse. She is active on Facebook, and she accepts all invitations and had her phone on her Facebook page. She talks to boys thinking they may be interested in her but she has mean tormented by many males’ reactions to her. It has been reoccurring that Joni comes to class devastated and broken because she is repeatedly told that she is ugly and that she is Crazy. Joni’s sense of self is shattered. She has no confidence in her self or her capabilities. What tempt someone to go out of their way to harass a vulnerable someone like that. I think it only took a little dis-inhibition to express very deep-rooted social attitudes towards disability. Being drunk or being less identifiable on social media does bring sides of people they do not usually express.

It is not even that deeply buried that disability is considered a disease that must be avoided with every means. Today the opportunity of having DNA prenatal genetic screening conveys clearly what our society expect of disability, as a society we wish to make it disappear. The vast majority of parents choose to abort the baby if the screening was positive for developmental disabilities. Doctors do encourage the test in the first trimesters to make the decision easier. But who are we to decide that someone with disability should not exist?