

00:04

We all have milestones in life that we remember so vividly. The first one for me was when I was entering kindergarten. My big brother was in school, and by golly, it was my time. And I went trottin' down that hallway. I was so excited, I almost wet myself. And I go to the door, and there was the teacher with a warm welcome, and she took me into the classroom, showed me my little cubbyhole -- we all remember those little cubbyholes, don't we -- and we put our stuff in there. And then she said, "Go over to the circle and play with the kids until class starts." So I went over there and plopped down like I owned the place, and I'm playing, and all of a sudden, the boy next to me, he was wearing a white shirt with blue shorts. I remember it like it was yesterday. Suddenly he stopped playing and he said, "Why are you so short?" And I just kept playing. I didn't think he was talking to me.

01:00

(Laughter)

01:01

And in a louder voice, he said, "Hey, why are you so short?" So I looked up and I said, "What are you talking about? Let's just play. We're happy. I've been waiting for this."

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And so we played, and about a minute later, the girl next to him, in a white shirt and a pink skirt, stood up, put her hands on her hips, and said, "Yeah, why do you look so different?" And I went, "What are you talking about? I don't look different. I'm not short. Again, let's just play."

01:32

About this time, I looked all around the circle I was in, and all the kids had stopped playing and they were all looking at me. And I'm thinking -- in today's language, it would be "OMG" or "WTF."

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(Laughter)

01:49

What just happened?

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So all the confidence that I went in with that morning was withering away as the morning went on and the questions kept coming. And at the end of the morning, before I went home, the teacher had us in a circle, and I actually found myself outside of the circle. I couldn't look at anybody. I could not understand what just happened.

02:13

And over the next few years, I hated to go out in public. I felt every stare, every giggle, every pointed finger, not the finger, but every pointed finger, and I hated it. I would hide behind my parents' legs like nobody could see me. And as a child, you can't understand another child's curiosity, nor an adult's ignorance. It became very apparent to me that the real world was not built for someone of my size, both literally or figuratively.

02:47

And so I have no anonymity, as you can probably tell, and while you can see my size, we all go through many challenges through our lifetime. And some you can see, like mine. Most you can't. You can't tell if someone's dealing with a mental illness, or they're struggling with their gender identity, they're caring for an aging parent, they're having financial difficulty. You can't see that kind of stuff. So while you can see one of my challenges is my size, seeing does not mean you understand what it's truly to be me on a daily basis, or what I go through. And so I'm here to debunk a myth. I do not believe you can walk in someone else's shoes, and because of that, we must adopt a new way of giving of ourselves. Simply stated, I will never know what it's like to be you and you will never know what it's like to be me. I cannot face your fears or chase your dreams, and you can't do that for me, but we can be supportive of each other. Instead of trying to walk in each other's shoes, we must adopt a new way of giving of ourselves.

04:02

I learned at an early age that I did have to do some things different than most people, but I also learned there were things I was on equal footing with, and one of those was the classroom. Heh, heh, heh. I was equal. As a matter of fact, I excelled in the classroom. This was vitally important, I discovered as I grew older and realized I wasn't going to be able to do a physical job. I needed an education. So I went on and got a university degree, but I felt to be one step ahead of everyone for employment, I needed to have an advanced university degree, so I went ahead and got that.

04:41

Now I'm ready for my interview. Remember your first interview? What am I going to wear? What questions? And don't forget that firm handshake. I was right there with you. So 24 hours before my interview, a friend of mine who I've known all my life called and said, "Michele, the building you're going in has steps." And she knew I couldn't climb steps. So suddenly, my focus changed. In my shoes, I was worried about how am I going to get there? So I went early and found a loading dock and got in and had a great interview. They had no idea what I went through for the day and that's OK.

05:17

You're probably thinking my greatest challenge that day was the interview, or getting in the building. In reality, my biggest challenge that day was getting through the loading dock without getting run over. I am very vulnerable in certain situations: airports, hallways, parking lots, loading docks. And so I have to be very careful. I have to anticipate and be flexible and move as quickly as I can sometimes.

05:48

So I got the job, and in my current role I travel quite a bit. And travel is a challenge for all of us these days. And so you probably get to the airport, run through security, get to the gate. Did I get my aisle seat or my window seat? Did I get my upgrade? Me, first of all, I don't run through anything.

06:07

(Laughter)

06:09

And I especially don't run through the TSA because I get to experience the personal patdown. I won't comment on that. And then I make my way to the gate, and with my gift of gab that my parents said I was born with, I talk to the gate agent, and then I say, "By the way, my scooter weighs this much, I have a dry cell battery, and I can drive it down to the door of the plane." Also, the day before, I had called the city where I'm traveling to to find out where I could rent a scooter in case mine gets broken on the way. So in my shoes, it's a little bit different.

06:43

When I get onto the plane, I use my gift of gab to ask the lady to put my bag up, and they graciously do. I try not to eat or drink on a plane because I don't want to have to get up and walk on the plane, but nature has its own schedule, and not long ago, it knocked and I answered. So I walked up to the front of the plane and gabbed with the flight attendant, and said, "Can you watch the door? I can't reach the lock." So I'm in there doing my business, and the door flies open. And there's a gentleman there with a look of horror on his face. I'm sure I had the same look. As I came out, I noticed that he was sitting right across from me, and he's in total, complete embarrassment. So I walk up to him and I quietly go, "Are you going to remember this as much as I am?"

07:33

(Laughter)

07:39

And he goes, "I think so."

07:41

(Laughter)

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Now, while he's probably not talking about it publicly, I am.

07:46

(Laughter)

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But we talked for the rest of the flight, and we got to know each other, our families, sports, work, and when we landed, he said, "Michele, I noticed someone put your bag up. Can I get that for you?" And I said, "Of course, thank you." And we wished each other well, and the most important thing that day was that he was not going to leave with that embarrassment, that experience of embarrassment. He won't forget it, and neither will I, but I think he will remember more our chat and our different perspectives.

08:21

When you travel internationally, it can be even more challenging in certain ways. A few years ago, I was in Zanzibar, and I come wheeling in, and think about that. Short, white, blond woman in a chair. That doesn't probably happen every day. So I go up, and with my gift of gab, I start to talk to the agent. So friendly, and I ask about their

culture and so forth, and I notice there wasn't a jet bridge. So I had to kind of say, "Not only do you have to lift my chair, I could use some help getting up the steps." So we got to spend about an hour together while we waited for the flight, and it was the most magnificent hour. Our perspective changed for both of us that day. And once I got on the flight, he patted me on the back and wished me well, and I thanked him so much. And again, I think he's going to remember that experience more than when I first came in, and there was a bit of hesitation.

09:22

And as you notice, I get a lot of help. I would not be where I am today if it was not for my family, my friends, my colleagues and the many strangers that help me every single day of my life. And it's important that we all have a support system. Asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.

09:45

(Applause)

09:52

We all need help throughout our lifetime, but it is just as important that we are part of other people's support systems. We must adopt that way of giving back. We all obviously have a role to play in our own successes, but think about the role we have to play in other people's successes, just like people do for me every single day.

10:17

It's vitally important that we help each other, because society is increasingly placing people in silos based on biases and ideologies. And we must look past the surface and be confronted with the truth that none of us are what you can see. There's more to us than that, and we're all dealing with things that you cannot see. So living a life free of judgment allows all of us to share those experiences together and have a totally different perspective, just like the couple of people I mentioned earlier in my stories.

11:02

So remember, the only shoes you truly can walk in are your own. I cannot walk in yours. I know you can't walk in my size 1s --

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(Laughter)

11:14

but you can try. But we can do something better than that. With compassion, courage and understanding, we can walk side by side and support one another, and think about how society can change if we all do that instead of judging on only what you can see.

11:37

Thank you.

11:38

(Applause)

11:44

Thank you.