

BREAKINGBARRIERS

everybody belongs ■ everybody serves

Spring 2021 | Theme: Race and Disability

Being Black, Indigenous, or a person of color and living with a disability multiplies challenges for individuals and diminishes the opportunities that society gives them. Authors in this issue tell their stories at the intersection of race and disability.

Support Students; Don't Villainize Them

by Dr. Didi L. Watts

The R.O.C.K. Church (RCA), Los Angeles CA

Over my 20-plus years in education, I have worked with brilliant students who have not been able to work to their full potential for various reasons, including systemic issues such as chronic homelessness or chronic illness. For Black students, there has been another reason: unconscious bias, which has led to placement in special education. Students have shared that they were not held to high expectations because of their circumstances. As a result, they have felt ostracized. I was one such student.

Al lived with his mother and younger brother in the Los Angeles area. While in third grade, he was suspended for two days due to willful defiance. His mother requested a special education evaluation due to poor academic achievement, but at the time of the evaluation, Al was found not to be eligible for services.

Al had excessive absences from school, averaging 31 missed days per school year due to chronic illness. His family had dealt perpetually with unstable housing throughout Al's education years. As a result, he moved to several different schools over the next two years. During fifth grade, Al received a one-day suspension for attempting to damage property. Al transferred to a different school for sixth grade, where he remained for the first quarter of the school year. He would transfer to two more schools that same year. Again, Al was suspended for willful defiance for one day. Academically, he continued to demonstrate difficulties meeting grade-level standards, receiving scores below and far below proficiency.

In seventh grade, Al was reevaluated for special education and met eligibility criteria for Other Health Impairment (OHI), due to attention-deficit-like characteristics. Al was placed in a special day class within the school. He remained in that school until eighth grade, when the individualized education program (IEP) team agreed that the least restrictive environment would

be the nonpublic school setting. (Certified by the state to provide special education services when a school district is unable to meet the needs of a student, nonpublic schools essentially segregate students from their nondisabled peers.)

AI is one of hundreds of thousands of students who have been placed in special education based on biases. Rather than providing early intervention for academics or addressing systemic issues such as housing insecurity or healthcare inadequacies, acting-out behavior has led to placement in special education for many students. We must change the system rather than villainize the students for society's ills. Students are resilient, so let's support prevention and intervention services.

Being Black and Disabled in Corporate America

by Marcus Wroten

Maple Avenue Ministries (CRC-RCA), Holland MI

Even if the world refuses to say so, being Black in America is hard, to say the least. In most cases, when you're Black, you're born into disadvantage and struggle. You have lower income and a higher rate of single parenthood. Did you know that 70–

80 percent of African American kids (myself included) are raised in a single-parent home?

Being born with a disability makes everything 10 times harder—and it doesn't matter what color your skin is. Living with a disability presents situations that most people aren't ready for or equipped to handle. Please know that I'm not bragging, but just speaking my truth. We are a looks-based society, and studies have confirmed that people who "look better" (whatever that means) have a better quality of life.

Think about it: people with visible disabilities are judged on looks more than anyone. Add skin tone to that, or being a woman, and the odds are really stacked against you. Gainful employment is something many people with disabilities struggle to achieve. The more I think about that, the more scared I become.

I'm so afraid that all of my education will go for naught. In a more equitable world, we would all be judged on the basis of character, not on skin tone or physical limitations. I can't count how many jobs I have been turned down for because of my cerebral palsy. Saying that this is a source of frustration for me is an understatement. The only solace I can find in this is the realization that I am not the only one dealing with this issue.

At 42 years of age, I have so much riding on my decision to return to college this year to pursue a second degree. I need to be employed before the year ends. I know that I—and millions like me—have a lot to offer prospective employers, if we would only be given the chance. The problem is, as a Black man with a disability, I am always begging for inclusion.

COVID's Effect on Marginalized Groups

by Rev. Dr. Micheal Edwards

Executive director, Regional Synod of New York (RCA)

During this pandemic, various health organizations have cited higher occurrence and death rates connected with race and disability. Among church communities within the Regional Synod of New York—rural, urban, and suburban—we have observed that COVID-19 has made mobility issues related to self-care and recovery difficult for African Americans and Hispanics to secure due to the lack of information and health services provided in their communities. We also recognize the concerns of people of color and those with disabilities in securing vaccines regardless of gender or socio-economic factors.

For people with disabilities, including mental health challenges, the complex interaction of biological, psychological, lifestyle,

environmental, social, and neighborhood factors have been amplified in the pandemic. The Synod of New York is seeking ways to educate churches to address these issues.

Cognitive Disabilities Often Ignored

by Yolanda Diaz Escolastico

Marble Collegiate Church (RCA), New York City NY

I was a healthy 25-year-old when I began experiencing minor eye discomfort. I continued working full time and pursuing my education, but episodes of disorientation, dizziness, blurry vision, and falls became more common. At 27, I was devastated to learn I had multiple sclerosis (MS), an unpredictable disease of the central nervous system. As a Puerto Rican woman, I had never heard of MS, nor knew anyone with it. Today, 12 years later, I am happily married, hold a master's degree in education, and have a 9-year-old autistic daughter, but MS has greatly affected my cognitive abilities.

In the community where I live, which is predominantly Hispanic, people don't take cognitive difficulties seriously. Many think that individuals with cognitive impairments are relaxing or being foolish. Even though people in my community are aware of my MS diagnosis, many believe I'm not being honest.

Many people think of a disability only when it is visible. They forget that there are limitations that cannot be seen, and that's my biggest challenge. Many tell me that I look fine, and others ask if I am really sick, but they do not understand the struggle I carry within. Some family members and friends ignore my daily challenges because they fail to recognize my cognitive limitations. Long are the days when everything seems gray and my mind disconnects from my surroundings. Days of confusion, failing memory, and even forgetting where I am standing all lead to concern about my future.

I had visible symptoms when I was diagnosed in 2008. I used a walker and needed assistance getting dressed and eating. Many of those physical impairments have improved, thanks to helpful doctors, medication, therapy, and family support. Even though I still have home care assistance and use a cane for support, many still have the impression that MS is not serious because I look fine to them. My ethnicity is a factor that contributes to a sense of discrimination. It would be so much different for individuals with cognitive impairments if the community took this issue more seriously, but my culture does not.

Cognitive deficit is real and so is the oppression I feel. If people took the time to learn about the invisible symptoms many live with and showed compassion, this oppression could be

avoided. My sincere desire is to be fully included in a community that understands invisible limitations like mine that are often unseen and difficult to explain.

The Joy I Find in Living with MS

by Rev. Angela Taylor Perry

Fort Worth TX

These challenges describe my experience of living every day with More Strength—my version of MS, commonly known as multiple sclerosis. As a woman over 65 who is Black, I find that the joys of living with a disability outweigh the list of sorrows I could name.

My strength comes from above and the beauty of God's holiness goes before me and lights a path for all to follow. The first year of multiple sclerosis motivated me to live with my cup half full instead of half empty.

In other words, I refused to be defeated. All the joys of living with a chronic disease for 35 years have gifted me with a plethora of lovely friends and fantastic opportunities that I would not have experienced without the gift of MS, more strength.

Jesus Christ is my gift from God the Father. He is my rock, my refuge, my salvation, and my hope. I am redeemed by the

blood of the Lamb and the power of his testimony. This is why I tell the truth about my experience—namely, that what God begins, God finishes.

I can say this because he lives!

Editor's Note

Our Work Toward Equity

Over the years, co-editor Terry DeYoung and I have led a workshop that we titled, “Difference, Power, and Privilege in North American Society.” We began by distributing a worksheet that, in two columns, listed a variety of characteristics that society values, then invited participants to choose between two possibilities, depending on how they self-identified. For ethnicity, participants could choose between “European American” and “Other”; for ability, they chose either “Non-disabled” or “Disabled”; for criminal history, either “None” or “Felony conviction”; and for social skills, either “Typical” or “Interaction difficult.” Most people circled the first characteristic—those in the left-hand column (European American, Non-disabled, etc.). Then we discussed implications for people who circled more of the characteristics in the right-hand column.

Even though individuals have no control over most of the characteristics listed, society values some over others. The more

characteristics a person has in the right-hand column, the fewer opportunities society affords them for education, employment, housing, and more.

Some people object to this exercise, saying that everyone has equal opportunity, or that we should not divide people by various “identities” because we are all made in the image of God. But, as some of the stories suggest in this edition of *Breaking Barriers*, people are not afforded equal privilege. Society places a double strike against people of color who also have disabilities. Of all places, churches need to become communities in which we work for equity for all people.

—Mark Stephenson

Upcoming themes

Summer 2021—The arts and disability

If you live with a disability, please send us your poems, short stories, photographs, or photos of visual works of art you created. Items do not need to be about your disability. Our typical word limit for written pieces is 400 words. Send your submission **by April 2**.

Fall 2021—Speech differences

People living with speech differences, such as stuttering and cerebral palsy that affects speech, face various challenges such

as avoidance of interacting with others, not being allowed to finish their thoughts, and even assumptions others make about their intelligence. If you live with a speech difference, please tell us a story or give us your advice in no more than 400 words. Send your submission **by August 2**.

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