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Disability: Dealing with it; Stereotypes of it

Looking down upon someone with a disability can have an extremely adverse effect on their life. Just because someone is in a wheel chair that doesn't mean that they are worthless or incapable. This subject hits very close to home for me as my father was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, a degenerative muscle disease. A disability can make one feel as though they are a burden, or that their life no longer has meaning. The relentless stares of passersby do little to thwart this way of thinking, but an inability in one area does not constitute an inability in all areas.

My father grew up exceptionally poor in Paintsville, Kentucky. The son of a coal miner, he was the youngest and the only one of his nine siblings to graduate high school. He went on to put himself through college, going to school nights while juggling his job, wife, and two kids. He earned a degree and opened his own appliance and electronics business. Shortly thereafter, he began to display symptoms and was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. He was approximately thirty-three years old at the time. It affected him with a slow progression until he went from using a cane to being confined to a wheel chair. At this point, things began to change. He felt, and rightly so, that he had lost the respect of his employees. He felt as though he were looked at differently.

The sun is beaming down on me as I load the television I just sold into my customer's black Ford Explorer. The humidity is off the charts, and it's mid-July, which means it's unbearably hot. It's only 1:00 in the afternoon, though it feels much later. I look up toward that burning sun while shading my eyes and wiping the sweat from my brow. We are four and a half months from the new millennium, and talk of Y2K has already begun.

My father's appliance and electronics store has been slow today. As I walk back inside and feel the immediate relief of the industrial strength air conditioning, it takes my eyes a few long seconds to readjust to the fluorescent lighting. It smells of fast food and laziness. His sales staff is, as always, sitting behind the desk on their stools. A burger from the McDonald's out front in one hand, a soft drink bearing the same name in the other. Today, it's Charles and Margaret. Margaret is roughly fifty-five years old, displays too many wrinkles for her age, and appears as though she hasn't showered in a week. She has a short curly mixture of blonde-gray hair, is moderately overweight, and only stands at about 5'1". Charles is completely bald from the chemotherapy; he is approximately the same age as Margaret though much bigger and older looking. He stands right at 6' and carries about fifty to sixty extra pounds of weight.

As I head toward my father's office I look past them to our show room. It's very large and unusually slow; today we have but two sets of customers. One, an older married couple in search of a new stove. The other is a younger, presumably newly married couple looking for a washer and dryer, at least those are the respective departments in which they are currently shopping. Our illustrious sales staff is too busy with themselves to offer any help, so I do so myself. Both sets of customers inform me they're just looking for the time being. I direct their attention to the front desk and assure them that any questions they may have can be answered by either Margaret or Charles.

I walk the remaining front of our showroom and finally arrive at my father's office. The office is about twenty by fifteen feet, contains a long dark wooden table with matching chairs, a desk with computer and files to the left (my desk), and my father's desk at the far end, which matches the table and chairs and displays its own computer, which he is currently sitting behind. He is forty-three years old and has retained every bit of his thick black hair, though it is just beginning to gray. Unfortunately, the muscular dystrophy has become much more prevalent. He has become noticeably weaker as he no longer walks with a cane, as he has for so long. His 5'10" frame is now hunched into his motorized chair.

He looks up at me as I enter, his face worry stricken. Never before have I seen him in such a state.

His hair is a bit disheveled, face long, and mouth pulled down at the corners. He pulls his glasses up and rubs the bridge of his nose where they lay.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as I look upon him in genuine concern. “Is everything alright?”

“I’ve just about,” he began as he sighed, “I don’t know if I can do it anymore.” He said as he looked up at me through his hair, now having fallen forward and partially hidden his face. His eyes and voice both appearing heavy.

“Do what anymore?” I asked with alarming dismay. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Nobody respects me anymore; I’ll tell someone to do something, ten minutes later I’ll find them right where I left them. It’s been this way ever since I’ve gotten stuck in this damn chair!” He stated emphatically. My heart immediately sank. “I’m a shell of what I once was.” His expression momentarily broke almost giving way to tears. I had never seen him this way.

“Dad,” I said warmly, moving around his desk. Putting an unsteady hand on his shoulder I wanted to reassure him. “I’ve never known anyone as strong as you. What people think about you doesn’t matter, I know you and what you’re capable of and so does your family.”

He sat still for a minute, head in hands. He then began to apologize as he composed himself. “I’m sorry,” he began, “I’m alright,” he reassured me. “Just a little tired I guess.”

I leaned over and hugged him; he was big and still felt muscular, despite his inability to walk. He sat back up and began to make a phone call as though nothing had happened. It was amazing to me how a few lazy sales people and insubordinate delivery personnel could make him feel so little, so inconsequential.

He kept his store open for another year and a half. Having finally succumbed to disrespect, insubordination, theft, and a blatant disregard for the overall good of the business by virtually every employee, his doors were closed in December of 2000. This eventually led to the loss of his house

(which he built), his money (which was spent by his wife and younger son), and his wife. He couldn't be left alone due to a tracheotomy in 2002, so I became his primary care giver.

In summary, had his employees treated him with the same respect they had prior to his disease confining him to a wheel chair, he very well could have kept his business, home, and everything else that he had worked so hard to obtain. Even in the condition he was in, he was able to find a new house and live a decent life for quite some time. My father was more than capable of running his business from his chair. The stereotypes associated with disabilities are what essentially closed his doors. He was treated as though he had become incompetent, and no longer mattered. This new prejudice had an inherently adverse effect on his outlook on life, as well as his ability to properly manage his business.