

BREAKING BARRIERS

everybody belongs ■ everybody serves



THEME: DISABILITY ADVOCACY

In this issue, people who are involved in disability advocacy describe how and why they engage in advocacy with people who have disabilities and the challenges they face.



Gerri Yoshida (left) and Mana Hashimoto

Addressing Disability Stigma by Leading Personally

by Gerri Yoshida

Japanese American United Church
(RCA-United Methodist), New York City

Mana Hashimoto and I started working together in 2014 to find new performance opportunities for her as a blind choreographer and dancer. This led to my profound respect and enthusiasm for Mana's commitment to dance without sight. I saw her desire to make dance accessible to people with visual impairments through audio descriptions of her dance, preshow walk-throughs of the dance

space, and allowing audience members with visual impairments to feel her props and costume so they could imagine and participate in her performances.

In Japanese and Asian American cultures, there is strong shame, stigma, and silence around disability issues. However, God led Mana to advocate for the needs of those with visual impairments, and that helped her rise above helplessness and despair. In fact, four years ago, our church, the Japanese American United Church in New York City, celebrated its first Disability Awareness Sunday. By focusing on various physical and mental disabilities, we hope to make conversations more accessible.

"It is important for individuals to become independent and play a role in leadership," says Mana, who serves as our church's disability advocate. "Often people look at persons with disabilities as someone who needs care, but like any other individual, we have potential and gifts. Inclusion doesn't mean one side supports the other; it means both sides are supporting each other."

Attending this year's RCA/CRC Disability Leadership Training empowered us to more boldly champion the belief that "everybody belongs, everybody serves." We desire to include and provide a sense of belonging to people who are isolated due to aging and illnesses. We want to train our children and young people to be sensitive and proactive. Most importantly, we recognize that people with disabilities deserve to have their independence recognized and respected. Through contributing their gifts, leadership, and interests, they enrich the whole body of Christ and extend God's kingdom work.

Isolation Often a Reality in Advocacy

by **Miriam Spies**

CRC Disability Concerns, Burlington, ON

When I began my ministry with Disability Concerns at the CRC's Burlington, ON, office, I spent time getting to know regional disability advocates in Canada. I have been involved in self-advocacy as I negotiate life with cerebral palsy, but only recently have I started connecting the dots with others on the same pilgrimage.

I am humbled to learn about the struggles and joys that CRC and RCA advocates have experienced within their congregations and their communities. Over and over they have shared with me how life-giving and wonderful their ministry with Disability Concerns continues to be, and how isolating this work can feel as they struggle to advocate for congregations where all belong and all serve.

The role of the advocate, with its struggles and joys, has brought me into conversation with Jesus' farewell discourse in John's Gospel. He tells his disciples they will not be alone once he dies and ascends to heaven. God will send the Advocate, or Paraclete (which the Greek translates to "called alongside") to remind them of Jesus' teachings. Though Jesus will no longer be walking with them, the Holy Spirit will be alongside each of them. Jesus' comforting words—"do not be afraid"—are repeated throughout Scripture because we need to be reassured that we are never alone and that God's love continually seeks us out.

Whether serving in faith communities or wider society, advocates need reminders that they are not alone. We are doing ministry the best we can in our corner of the world, and we need to know there are others working in their corners—all of us with the grace of God and love of Jesus Christ. We need one another to calm our fears and to energize each other to advocate alongside people with disabilities.

The Spirit assures us that we are never abandoned, even in the midst of the joys, sorrows, successes, and mistakes that are part of life in this broken and beautiful world. May it be so, and may we continue to be called alongside each other!



 *Miriam Spies*

Ways to Get Involved

Without monetary support for Disability Concerns, we wouldn't be able to share these stories. To help us make sure that "everybody belongs, everybody serves," would you please consider praying for us and making a financial contribution? It's quick, it's easy, and it's a gracious and beautiful act of obedience.

- Give to RCA Disability Concerns: www.rca.org/disability and click on "Give"
- Give to CRC Disability Concerns: www.crcna.org/disability and click on "Donate"



Making a Place of Welcome for All

by **Cara Milne**

Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan (CRC) regional advocate

There is a big difference between being a guest and belonging. As a speaker and author who specializes in community building for people with disabilities (see www.mpoweredplanning.com), I am often asked by churches how to begin to include people who are vulnerable. Although there is no one perfect way, there are specific things we can do to help create an atmosphere that includes everyone:

- **Language:** Always keep in mind that a person is first, and their disability or labels are secondary. We want to refer to people with disabilities, not disabled people. Also, avoid a high-pitched or condescending tone of voice. When we talk to adults as if they are babies, we increase the stereotype that they are childlike.
- **Respect:** Aim to get to know people—their interests, roles, and hobbies. When conversing with a person who has a disability, talk as you would to any other person.
- **Contribution:** No one wants to be a charity, so we need to give people a chance to genuinely participate and contribute in congregational life. Support people to give back in any way that fits for them, whether as a greeter, usher, coffee maker, or whatever else.
- **Don't take over:** A support person or volunteer should not take over everything. For example, a Sunday school class might want to include Jessica, but then assume that her volunteer will do everything for her. Volunteers should not help Jessica make every craft perfect. Instead, they need to focus on the importance of having Jessica connect to her peers. Focus on relationships first, and skills or academics second.

Remember that it is often a slow journey, but start where you are. In the end, we are all better when we all belong.



 Cara Milne



Upcoming themes

Spring 2019—Mental health and spiritual practice

How does living with a mental illness shape your faith and spiritual practice? As people who belong to Jesus Christ—body and soul, in life and in death—where do the rhythms of mental wellness, devotional life, and personal discipleship intersect? Please send us a note (not to exceed 400 words) about your experience **by February 4.**

Summer 2019—Down syndrome

Do you or a loved one have Down syndrome? Please send us a story (400 words)—whether a joy, a challenge, a loss, or a prejudice you've experienced—**by April 8.**

Email: mstephenson@crcna.org • tdeyoung@rca.org

My Path to Disability Advocacy

by **Sonrisa Cortes**

RCA Disability Concerns intern,
Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI

My most beloved role as an advocate has been working as a home health aide for Amy*. Amy has cerebral palsy and some cognitive limitations. She uses an electric wheelchair and has limited use of her arms and legs. Amy has high anxiety and does not enjoy changes in her routine, but there are afternoons we leave her house and go into the community. These days are always extra special.

But Amy and I are not always treated respectfully: Amy is often met with baby talk and comments on “how well she is doing” for simple tasks like driving her chair. She’s been told how “cute” she is simply for shopping in the grocery store.

These people pity my friend. In reality, they are the ones I take pity on. They do not know how talented Amy is in finding the perfect song to match the mood, nor how loving she is. They don’t know what a great aunt she is to her nephew, or how smart she is. To them, Amy is a disability, not Amy who happens to have a disability.

My time with Amy reminds me that raising awareness about disability is something I am passionate about, and disability advocacy has a long way to go. I advocate for friends and for strangers I have yet to meet. I strive to make my communities more inclusive and welcoming to all people. This is why I have dedicated myself to become a disability advocate.

**Name changed for privacy*



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Editor's note

The Art of Advocacy



Although I've lived my entire life with a disability, it wasn't until my mid-30s—when I agreed to serve on the board of directors for the local Center for Independent Living—that I was confronted with the need to begin advocating for other people with disabilities. That was nearly three decades and three job changes ago, and I'm still learning what it means to be an effective advocate, even in my tenth year as RCA coordinator for Disability Concerns. Disability advocacy is more art than science.

I can think of at least three components that are great assets for disability advocates—awareness, humility, and courage.

- Awareness means becoming educated about a particular disability-related issue and empathizing personally with those who are feeling excluded because of their disability.
- Humility acknowledges that I do not understand all the issues at work. Even if I think I know exactly how a situation can be corrected, it's likely that I don't understand everything involved.
- Courage is a willingness to “put myself out there” and risk opposition for the good of others.

Experience also comes in handy, but it's not as important as awareness, humility, and courage. Receiving affirmation and support from others are gifts that keep on giving, especially from those who have been excluded; keep in mind that their pain has been lessened by your efforts, regardless of whether the desired change actually is made to your satisfaction.

Finally, reading the stories in this issue submitted by other disability advocates gives a shot in the arm to my own awareness, humility, and courage. I'd love to hear yours.

—Terry A. DeYoung