NEVER LET YOUR DISABILITY DEFINE YOU

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Throughout my life, my parents have always told me to never let my disability define me. As a deaf person who hears and speaks well with cochlear implants and attends mainstream schools, I will not lie and say that it has been easy or that my disability does not get in my way. There have been many occasions when I just wanted to give up because I felt tired. However, I must keep moving forward because I need to realize that people with disabilities are the strongest because they encounter far more challenges than anyone else.

Currently, I am attending Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts and have less than two months until graduation. At school, I receive accommodations such as CART, usage of an FM system, and a note-taker. When I initially entered college, I was set on majoring in chemistry with the intention of teaching high school chemistry. However, in my third year, I had to take a sociology course as a requirement. During the first office hour with my sociology professor, I told her, “I will hate sociology.” As I became more exposed to the sociology field, I discovered many different topics of interest, such as accessibility and disability. A semester later, I returned to that same professor’s office begging her to let me change my major to sociology, despite only taking one class.

In my senior year, all sociology majors have the privilege of taking on an independent research project on a topic of interest. At my college, I was heavily involved in accessibility and disability issues. Additionally, I am co-founder and president of WheAccess, the first club on campus for students with disabilities. There are numerous studies on the experiences of students with disabilities within the classroom but limited on the faculty experience with accessibility. Therefore, I chose to focus my research project on understanding how accessibility shapes the faculty experience within the classroom. It is essential that we are understand the faculty perspective because it will allow us to solve many issues with accessibility in the college classroom. Advocating for accessibility and persons with disabilities has allowed me to use my voice to stand up for those who do not have a voice.

As an organization, the American Cochlear Implant Alliance focuses on advocating for cochlear implants and the importance of early intervention. About thirty years ago, my parents took the risk of getting my older sister, Rachel, a cochlear implant through the early pediatric clinical trials in the 1980s. Several years later, I received my cochlear implant at fifteen months and became the youngest child in the country at the time to receive a cochlear implant. Through my parents’ continuous advocacy and support for cochlear implants and listening and spoken language, I am forever grateful for the person I am today.

Jessica Chaikof presented a poster on her research at the Eastern Sociological Society’s winter conference 2019. She won best undergraduate poster in her session.