

ADVOCATES

First, we listen ...

"Each of Us Is a Person First"

By Angel Arthur, 1st Prize Winner

What I've experienced of humans as I've grown is people have an overwhelming need to label others. One reason why is to identify with those we perceived to be "like" us. Another reason is to over simplify those we see as different and attempt to say that we understand "those people. It's done to make differences more comfortable for ourselves, and this can lead to extreme ignorance instead understanding. I've labeled others before and have been labeled by others.

I grew up the eldest daughter of an American Baptist minister, a family made of 2 adopted children, one child black & one white, one child physically disabled the other not, one parent with advanced degrees & the other with severe dyslexia, who barely graduated high school. We love each other in spite of our many differences. My sister and I were taught to care about people, because they are people.

Our family has been labeled as "Ni***r Lovers" for bringing my sister into our family. Together we've been threatened by the clan, physically attacked, called many names, lost potential churches, had crosses burnt on the lawn and came close to having to bury my sister after she was beaten. We learned from our parents not to hate or take revenge on the people who did these things, but to instead find reasoning in their actions and share our experience with people we felt could gain from what we had been through.

I've personally been labeled due to my disability as: a cripple, a gimp, an invalid, stupid, useless, worthless, a burden and accused of "taking" a spot in a program that should have gone to someone who deserved it (although I had the highest placement scores!). People who label those of us with disabilities by using these words, do so because they're scared that their body could end up like mine.

In college, I was on a road trip with the varsity wheelchair basketball team; there were roughly 30 of us in wheelchairs. We had gone out to eat & were waiting for tables when a group of 8 senior citizens came out and began gawking at us. After staring for a

minute, one of the older folks said, "Wow, look at all the invalids they let come out today!" I spoke up and asked that they not use language like they had & then told them who we were. Taking the few minutes to let them see us as people hopefully changed the way they would interact with other disabled people in the future.

I am guilty of labeling other people too. When I was younger, I used to think "poor" people only lived in certain places. I'd grown up middle class; all my friends were middle class. I'd met people who are "poor", but I really didn't know any people personally. One day in class (not meaning any harm) I made a comment about what I thought I knew of lower income people. I instead alienated and embarrassed a girl who would become my best friend, through my ignorance. After school she came up to me and told me that I'd hurt her, and invited me to her house. I learned what an ignorant fool I had been & to think about what was coming out of my mouth before speaking.

We need to see each other as people first & not put labels on each other. We need to speak out when we recognize others using labels and hurtful language or actions. To remain silent and inactive allows for intolerance and hate to take root, and this cannot be allowed! When you see someone as a person and not a label, and you treat them as a person first, others will follow your example!