

# ADVOCATES

First, we listen ...

*"Each of Us Is a Person First"*

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In the 5 years that I've worked at Advocates I've learned the value in having a "person first" mind set when attempting to create relationships with the individual I support. There have been times when I've failed to do this.

I've made the mistake of paying too much attention to how others have described an individual, or paid too much attention to an alarming detail that was placed in a person's chart about something that happened many years ago – which led me to having a preconceived idea of what that person would actually be like when I met them. Every time I've done this, I've failed – both the new person I'm meeting and myself. I've failed to allow that individual the opportunity to show me who they are and I've let my biased, negative ideas make it difficult for me to see the person for who they are now. Sure, historical information is important, but people change are so much more than any diagnosis or random incident report could ever indicate. They say you never get a second chance to make a first impression; unfortunately, a lot of the people we support don't even get a first!

I've been fortunate enough to build many relationships within the Advocates community, which have taught me a lot about the importance of avoiding labels and passing judgments. I think as staff, we strive to eliminate our own biases and see each other and the people we support as more than just the diagnosis they came with. I think that educating people is the toughest part.

Currently I work at a group residence with 8 amazing individuals that because of my relationship with them, I would have a really difficult time trying to put them into a category as loosely defined as whatever diagnosis they are individually associated with. However, within this group of individuals, there are several people who have a really difficult time treating each other as "people first" and who often react to each other with negative and derogatory label – likes names such as "mental patient" or worse. This

probably has a lot to do with spirits that have been broken by other “treatment professionals” who have labeled them for many years.

It’s taken a long time, and is still very much a work in progress, to educate the folks here about how these negative and derogatory terms make others feel and undermine their own humanity. After many meetings, where we call attention to these types of “mental illness slurs” and have been trying to educate the group about the reasons it’s wrong, changes are starting to happen.

A small example of this that felt pretty ground breaking to me happened when I was having a conversation with an individual that I’ve known since I started working at Advocates, and who really struggles to interact with others without using negative remarks. During this specific conversation, he was able to recant a defamatory statement without my prompting and it allowed me to see that change was starting to happen here. I won’t use the person’s name but I remember the quote exactly – “are those mental patients that live there, wait, I mean do they have a mental illness too”. That might not seem like a big thing to most people but it felt like a huge step in a better direction to me.