

# North American Inclusion Month

## NAIM

BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE JEWISH COMMUNITY

### It's OK to Be Different BY ANGIE ERICKSON

**W**HY ME? I OFTEN ASK MYSELF. WHY DID I HAVE TO BE the one? Why did I get picked to be different? Why are people mean to me and always treating me differently? These are the kinds of questions that I used to ask myself. It took more than 10 years for me to find answers and to realize that I'm not *more* different than anyone else.

I was born on June 29, 1978. Along with me came my twin sister, Stephanie. She was born with no birth defects, but I was born with cerebral palsy. For me, CP made it so I shake a little; when my sister began to walk, I couldn't. The doctors knew it was a minor case of cerebral palsy. But they didn't know if I'd ever walk straight or do things that other kids my age could do.

At first my disability did not bother me, because when you're a toddler, you do things that are really easy. When it took me a little longer to play yard games, because I couldn't run that well, my friends just thought I was slow. My disability was noticed when other children were learning how to write and I couldn't. Kids I thought were my friends started to stay away from me because they said I was different. Classmates began commenting on my speech. They said I talked really weird. Every time someone was mean to me, I would start to cry and I would always blame myself for being different.

People thought I was stupid because it was hard for me to write my own name. So when I was the only one in the class to use a typewriter, I began to feel I was different. It got worse when the third graders moved on to fourth grade and I had to stay behind. I got held back because the teachers thought I'd be unable to type fast enough to keep up. Kids told me that was a lie and the reason I got held back was because I was a retard. It really hurt to be teased by those I thought were my friends.

After putting up with everyone making fun of me and me crying about it, I started sticking up for myself when I was 10, in fourth grade. I realized if I wanted them to stop, I would have to be the person who made them stop. I finally found out who my real friends were, and I tried to ignore the ones who were mean. Instead of constantly thinking about the things I couldn't do, I tried to think about the things I *could* do, and it helped others, and myself, understand who I really was. When there was something I couldn't do, such as play Pictionary, I sat and I watched or I would go find something else to do. A few people still called me names and made fun of me, but after a while, when they saw they didn't get a reaction, they quit, because it wasn't fun anymore. What they didn't know was that it did still hurt me. It hurt me a lot more than they could ever imagine.

When I was 12, my family moved. I kept this fairy tale in my head that, at my next school, no one would be mean to me or would see that I had a disability. I'd always wished I could be someone other than myself. I found out the hard way that I wasn't going to change, that I'd never be able to write and run with no problems. When kids in my new school found out that I couldn't write and my talking and walking were out of the ordinary, they started making fun of me. They never took time to know me.

Everything went back to the way it was before. I went back to blaming myself and thinking that, since I was different, I'd never fit in. I would cry all the time, because it was so hard for me to make friends again. I didn't know whether I should trust anyone—I thought that if people knew that I had a disability they would not like me anymore. It took me a long time to understand that I had to return to not caring about what other people say.

People make fun of others because of insecurity. They have to show off to feel better about themselves. When a person made fun of me everyone thought it was just a big joke. After a while I just started laughing along with them or walking away. It really made some kids mad that they weren't getting any reaction out of me. Yeah, it still hurt a lot. I wanted to break down and start crying right then and there, but I knew I didn't want them to get their pleasure out of my hurt feelings. I couldn't cry.

I still get really frustrated when I can't do certain things, and I probably always will. I thought I should give people a better chance to get to know me, but I knew that I would probably get hurt. I never thought that anyone would want to be friends with somebody who had cerebral palsy. At times I have trouble dealing with kids making fun of me, but these are people who need help figuring out things in life and need to be treated better themselves. Maybe then they'll treat others the same. They look disappointed when I walk away or laugh when they try to make fun of me. Perhaps they're hurting more than I am.

It took a lot of willpower on my part and a lot of love from family and friends to get where I am today. I learned that no one was to blame for my disability. I realize that I can do things and I can do them very well. Some things I can't do, like taking my own notes in class or running in a race, but I will have to live with that. At 16, I believe I've learned more than many people will learn in their whole lives. I have worked out that some people are just mean because

they're afraid of being nice. They try to prove to themselves and others that they are cool, but, sooner or later, they're going to wish they hadn't said some of those hurtful things. A lot of people will go through life being mean to those with disabilities because they don't know how to act or what to say to them—they feel awkward with someone who's different.

Parents need to teach their children that it's all right to be different and it's all right to be friends with those who are. Some think that the disabled should be treated like little kids for the rest of their lives. They presume we don't need love and friends, but our needs are the same as every other human being's.

There are times when I wish I hadn't been born with cerebral palsy, but crying about it isn't going to do me any good. I can only live once, so I want to live the best I can. I am glad I learned who I am and what I am capable of doing. I am happy with who I am. Nobody else could be the Angela Marie Erickson who is writing this. I could never be, or ever want to be, anyone else.



*I found out  
who my real  
friends were  
and ignored  
the ones who  
were mean*

ERICKSON, now a sophomore at Wayzata High School in Plymouth, Minn., wrote this essay as a ninth grader at junior high.