

How Would You Feel?

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How would you feel if you were wheelchair bound and people stared at you, or assumed you were only half a person? How would you handle never getting past the first job interview no matter how perfectly you fit the position?

I have met some of these people, and their differences offer us the greatest lessons to learn about human compassion and understanding. As a parent of a challenged child, I have experienced first-hand the pains of an uneducated society, one that lacks understanding or the desire to acquire it. I cannot describe the hurt that comes from the stares, the giggles, and – hard to believe – the mean-spirited comments.

I've now dedicated my life to teaching others that those with "differing abilities" – not "disabilities" – have more in common with us than we can imagine. I am blessed and honored to be an advocate for those who may be physically different, but who have positive attributes that so many of us are lacking.

In my effort to learn more about those with disabilities, I have met two remarkable men, both in wheelchairs. Tim Sokol, 45, has cerebral palsy and lives in a group home with several roommates. Tim is both delightful and personable, and he was eager to talk about his journey and experiences toward being accepted in society.

Tim has observed that people treat him as a wheelchair and not as a real person. How heart-breaking! He told me he never feels disabled until people treat him like he's disabled. Tim wondered aloud why parents don't teach their children not to



Tim Sokol



Erik Kratky

stare at people in wheelchairs, but to accept them as they are.

Waiters and waitresses often assume that Tim cannot place his own order. Can you imagine how that feels? His advice to others is to never give up asserting your own abilities. Use your skills to teach as many people as possible that you can and do contribute to society and have, as Aristotle described it, "a good life, well lived."

Erik Kratky, 28, is an energetic college teacher. When I met him, he told me he would be in a tournament the next weekend, and he invited me to watch. Erik is a member of the Cleveland Wheelchair Cavaliers Basketball Team. I was amazed at the skill and confidence these young men showed as they wheeled their way around the court.

Erik has a can-do attitude that lights up a room. Cancer and numerous surgeries put him in a wheelchair, but his circumstances cannot keep him down. He simply will not allow it. Unlike Tim, Erik was able-bodied for over 20 years.

Both men sport positive attitudes as they attempt to help people understand that people with disabilities deserve the same chance to make a living, impact society and be treated like anyone else. Both have been thrust into this role; neither is bitter about having it.

No matter how they came into their current roles, their goal is the same: to be included, to be able to use their skills, and to be an asset as they help others in their own journey to understanding. **PDJ**

The Cleveland Wheelchair Cavaliers are an affiliate of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association and are sponsored by the Cleveland Clinic, Invacare Corporation and the Cleveland Cavaliers. For information on how to join or sponsor the Cleveland Wheelchair Cavaliers, visit www.clevelandwheelchaircavaliers.com.