

Growing up in the 1950s and '60s, I didn't have classmates with disabilities; didn't see children or adults with disabilities at church, in stores, at Girl Scouts, at dance classes, or anywhere else. Like millions of others, I was denied the opportunity to know people with disabilities. Why? Because most people with disabilities were denied opportunities to *be* in any of those places. I didn't know what I was missing.

So when my son, Benjamin, was born prematurely in 1987 and diagnosed with cerebral palsy as a tiny infant, I was—like most parents—unsure of what to expect. Doom and gloom came from most professionals. Luckily, when my son was three, I was in the Partners in Policymaking leadership training, where my classmates were other parents *and* also adults with developmental disabilities. That's when my real education began: learning from people with disabilities (and my own son).

The training was life-changing. I realized my son *could* have a wonderful—a normal—life. He received a good education in general ed classrooms and was included in T-ball, karate, Scouts, and other ordinary activities. He made friends, had sleepovers, and has always been active in our community. He's earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees and is hunting for a job. But we couldn't have done it on our own; it was the power of others who helped shape the successful outcomes for our son and family.

It was the Power of One doctor who allayed a mother's apprehension with a positive outlook (instead of the gloomy prognoses of other doctors, therapists, early intervention personnel, etc.). It was the Power of One coach who welcomed the boy with a disability as a member of the T-ball team. One sensei in the karate class and One Scout leader did the same, even though they had never done it before. It was the Power of One elementary school principal who decided that his school would have no special ed room; children with disabilities would be educated in

# The Power of ONE

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general education classrooms where they were successful learners. One teacher in first grade, One in second grade, and so forth, welcomed boys and girls with disabilities into their classrooms and then did whatever it took to ensure their success.

It took One boy who used a wheelchair and other assistive devices who wanted to be an actor when he grew up. One set of parents supported that dream and One drama instructor helped hone the boy's skills alongside the other "hams" in the class.

Because of the One T-ball coach, the One sensei, the One Scout leader, the One drama instructor, and the One principal, children with and without disabilities grew up together. Twenty-something years later, some of these children have grown up to become teachers who know that having inclusive classrooms is the right thing to do because that's how they grew up. Some are employed in the human resource departments of businesses, and when a person with a disability applies for a job, the applicant isn't routinely discriminated against because the HR manager grew up with children with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and others with disabilities; they were her friends and classmates and she knows disability is "no big deal." And 15 percent or so of the hundreds of children who were the beneficiaries of the actions of the Ones described above will become *parents of children with disabilities!* Unlike me, they won't be unsure of what to expect. Having a friend or a classmate or a T-ball teammate who happened to

have a disability taught them that the presence of a disability is not a barrier to a person's success. They will not be afraid for their child's future and they'll reject the doom and gloom they're likely to hear from professionals. They'll know better.

In contrast, it takes One doctor to crush the hopes and dreams of the parents of a child with a disability. It takes One therapist to focus on the child's perceived deficits and to try to "fix" the child, while ignoring the child's abilities. It takes One principal to

**As any change must begin somewhere, it is the single individual who will experience it and carry it through. The change must indeed begin with an individual; it might be any one of us. Nobody can afford to look round and to wait for somebody else to do what he is loath to do himself.**

*Carl Jung*

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maintain a school where children with disabilities are not permitted to learn in general education classrooms and where children *without* disabilities are denied opportunities to learn from and about children with disabilities. It takes One teacher to refuse to accept a child with a disability in her general ed classroom. It takes One parent to believe the negative prognoses of so-called “experts,” and to accept the second-class treatment of her child. In turn, it takes only this One parent to set her child on the path to helplessness, segregation, dependence on the service system, and a life of poverty.

Too many of us are waiting for positive change, thinking things will get better only when policymakers or bureaucrats generate systems change. “Waiting” seems to be the status quo: parents are told to put their child’s name on the “waiting list” for “services” (and most do as they’re told instead of looking for alternatives).

But in our family’s life, the positive outcomes for our son weren’t the result of policies from a committee, bureaucracy, or administrative body; they were the *actions of ordinary people* who challenged the status quo: One principal, One teacher, One doctor, One coach, etc. The principal didn’t wait for the school district to change; he changed his school. The T-ball coach didn’t wait for the park and recreation department to create an “inclusion policy,” he just did the right thing for his players. You get the picture ... So where do we go from here?

First, people with disabilities and their families need to recognize their *own* Power. We have the power to reject negative prognoses, to choose inclusion over segregation, to look to our communities instead of relying only on the service system, and so on.

People with disabilities and families also need to recognize the Power of the One neighbor, One teacher, One principal, One coach, etc. If we don’t *already* have people in our lives who are exerting their power to support our values, hopes, and dreams; to create inclusive opportunities; and to generate other positive changes, we need to use our Power to ask

them, “What Will It Take?” (See the article on this strategy: <https://www.disabilityisnatural.com/what-will-it-take.html>.)

Second, everyone else—friends, neighbors, members of synagogues/churches, people involved in ordinary community activities, educators, and anyone else—consider the Power you can exert! A leader of a church/synagogue could reject “special,” separate worship activities in favor of inclusive activities for all, including leadership positions for those with disabilities and/or their families. The owner of a childcare center can welcome and support children with disabilities, including them in chronologically age-appropriate activities. Ditto: the leaders of a ballet class, gymnastics program, karate class, drama program, and/or other recreational activities.

A principal can make the executive decision to eliminate self-contained classrooms and welcome all students into general education classes. A physician, therapist, and/or other healthcare professional can provide support and encouragement by focusing on the strengths and abilities of a person with a disability. A friend or neighbor can agree to provide assistance to a child or adult with a disability when asked to do so, just as they would for a friend or neighbor without a disability. Brainstorm other examples.

What about people who work in the service system? They are, unfortunately, constrained in many ways by the rules and regs of the system. Nevertheless, they can still take actions that generate powerful, positive change. Consider an attitude adjustment, like presuming competence (<https://www.disabilityisnatural.com/presume-comp-1.html>); recognizing “behavior as communication” instead of punishing a person for “inappropriate behavior” (<https://www.disabilityisnatural.com/behavior.html>); or moving away from pity to equality (<https://www.disabilityisnatural.com/position.html>). Put on your thinking-cap and consider other examples.

*You possess the Power of One.* How will you use this power? To maintain the status quo or to take actions that can make the world a better place for one and all?

**In a nation of millions and a world of billions, the individual is still the first and basic agent of change.**

**Lyndon B. Johnson**