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Disabled seek understanding, acceptance

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Many of them had family members who didn’t want to mention as other students. Dina said.

Dina is able to function normally in a classroom setting. Her interpreter, Kristen, accompanies her to classes.

"My mother wanted me to be as much a part of the hearing world as possible," Dina said.

By learning cued speech and lip reading, Dina is able to function normally in a classroom setting. Her interpreter, Kristen, accompanies her to classes.

Rebecca continues to have difficulty around her to treat her differently. "I don’t usually tell anyone, unless they ask," Bo said. "Some people ask about why I can take special untimed tests at Onward, and when I explain to them that I have a learning disability it just blows me away to realize how ignorant some of the comments were. Some people were like: 'I wish that I could have something like that.' I can’t imagine people wanting to have what I have and what I have to deal with. If they had to walk a little in my shoes maybe they wouldn’t feel that way."

Each panelist also deals with the fact that their disability is a part of them. "The hardest part is how it has affected how I see myself," Rebecca said. "Sometimes it feels like I have been struck down by God, and it’s getting worse. I can see myself deteriorating every year, but there’s not much that can be done."

All the panelists agreed that the word disabled does not accurately fit their situations. They consider it an everyday put-down. Words like "difficulty," and "impaired" fit them more, they said.

"The government has their definition of ‘disabled’ and to get any assistance you have to fit into their neat mold," Rebecca said. "The word ‘disabled’ is what defines you."

Mary Fernandez, the coordinator of disability services at Onward, said the panelists showed a lot of courage in sharing their stories.

"They are just as normal as everyone else," Fernandez said. "People with special needs shouldn’t be seen as unusual. They are just like the rest of us."

Disability

Each panelist’s story was different, yet they all shared some of the same frustrations: not being understood by those around them, or the feeling that they stand out in some way even though they don’t want to. Many of them had family members who didn’t quite understand or accept that they had a problem that disallowed them to function as other students.

"My family is still in denial that this is something that I have," she said. "It’s really difficult when your family doesn’t believe or support you. And it’s difficult to explain to people that I have a joint disorder and how it affects me. I also feel like I am just a number to the specialist who diagnosed me. It’s hard to get treatment up here when you don’t have a signature from your doctor."

The panelists said the only time they typically talk about their disabilities is when they are asked.

"I tell my friends about my disability because I know that I have to rely on them," Rebecca said. "And the really great thing is that they understand and accept me for who I am."

Rebecca said she has a hard time telling her teachers about her problem.

"I don’t tell my teachers as much as I should," Rebecca said. "I really do like school, but there are some mornings when I can’t get out of bed because the pain’s too intense. Often I have to explain that my drops in attendance are due to a physical problem. I’m so afraid of being treated differently and I’m constantly afraid that I will abuse it if I let myself go."

Dina said she doesn’t want the people around her to treat her differently.

"I’m really happy to talk to those who don’t know about my hearing problem, but I don’t disclose that much," Dina said. "Some people talk to Kristen instead of to me and that can be frustrating. Overall, though, college people seem more open to including me in things that are going on. Some still push away when they find out."

Bo and Rose-Marie’s disabilities are less visible than Rebecca’s and Dina’s. Rose-Marie has learned through the Onward program, which helps students on campus who have physical and learning problems with their work, how to take tests and other tasks that help with studying, such as how to study correctly, audio taping papers on a cassette recorder and study skills.

"I don’t usually tell anyone, unless they ask," Bo said. "Some people ask about why I can take special untimed tests at Onward, and when I explain to them that I have a learning disability it just blows me away to realize how ignorant some of the comments were. Some people were like: 'I wish that I could have something like that.' I can’t imagine people wanting to have what I have and what I have to deal with. If they had to walk a little in my shoes maybe they wouldn’t feel that way."

Each panelist also deals with the fact that their disability is a part of them. "The hardest part is how it has affected her will is stronger. These three women may look like all other mainstream students, but they aren’t like all other mainstream students. Each of them has something that makes them different and labels them ‘disabled.’"

Rose-Marie has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Dina needs an interpreter to help her understand what others are saying. Rebecca has a degenerative joint disorder called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome.

Kicking off “Disability Awareness Week,” these women along with Bo, who is learning disabled, sat and talked Monday in the Totman lounge at the Memorial Union to a small audience about their disability and how it affects their daily lives.

See DISABILITY on page 6
Letters to the Editor

Misquoted

To the editor:

In response to Debra Hatch’s front page article “Disabled seek understanding, acceptance” (Maine Campus, Wednesday, April 14), I would like to clarify a few inaccuracies in the article. I was dismayed to read inaccurate quotes about what I said. I feel Ms. Hatch should have checked with me to make sure the facts were accurate. The issues she mentioned are true but I did not discuss these issues while I was on the panel. Ms. Hatch wrote, “She cannot, however, always communicate clearly. People sometimes have a problem understanding how she talks or how she has to speak.” Whether she understood me or not, I found this comment to be offensive because I asked the audience if they could not understand me, and they replied they did. Ann Smith told the audience if they could not understand me, then Kristen would voice for me. I explained how much I rely on lip-reading to communicate with others without using cued speech or a transliterator. Kristen explained the definition of cued speech and demonstrated some cues to the audience. I mentioned that people are more open-minded about my deafness. I also said that I want people to treat me like a hearing individual because I act more like a hearing person than a deaf person. I said that all deaf people are different and that not all deaf people (like me) knew American Sign Language or believe in the deaf culture.

Somehow, Ms. Hatch came up with an inaccurate quote, “Some people talk to [Kristen] instead of me and that can be frustrating.” Overall, though, college people are more open to including me in things that are going on. Some still push me away when they find out.” This is not what I said. I said that I do not self-disclose often because most people know I am deaf and it is obvious when I am in class with a transliterator sitting across from me. I did not mention anything about people talking to Kristen, I do not know what Ms. Hatch got this, but I want to make it clear what I really said. I said some people see my hearing aids and keep their distance from me, but there are others who do not know I am deaf and when they talk to me, it is too late for them to react when they realize I am deaf.

I do not mean to criticize Ms. Hatch’s article. I wanted to set the record straight about what was really discussed at the panel.

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