

Extra, Not Less

By Mika Hartman

As we commemorate National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), I find myself reflecting on a pivotal moment in my life that set me on my advocacy journey. It was a moment that occurred just after my son, who was born with Down syndrome, had made his grand entrance into the world. As I made my way to the NICU with my husband by my side, a stranger struck up a conversation in the elevator. Brimming with joy, I shared the news of our son and his extra 21st chromosome. Little did I know this stranger would leave me with a profound message: "Treat him like everyone else and keep your expectations high."

Her words, though seemingly obvious, carry a significant weight when considering how society often perceives and treats individuals with disabilities. Sadly, much of society still treats people with disabilities like babies with very low expectations. When people with disabilities accomplish big things, it's met with shock instead of celebration. From education to employment opportunities, often these basic rights, if being met at all, are more of "boxes checked" than "preparedness" or "inclusion."

Consider this: how frequently do you encounter individuals with intellectual disabilities when shopping, dining, or engaging with various businesses? The rarity of such encounters often prompts gratitude and appreciation for the company's inclusive hiring practices. However, considering that the unemployment rate is twice as high for people with disabilities, we still have a long way to go. This begs the question: why does society, despite the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, still struggle to fully embrace and normalize disabilities in the workplace, instead of perceiving them as "less than"?

Putting it simply, there are two very real problems that my friends with disabilities face in the workplace. One is misperceptions, stereotyping, discrimination, and stigma toward people with disabilities. The second is the fear of losing their social security disability. If you've read this far, I want you to know that you can easily change the first one. Disability exclusion has stemmed from the belief that having a disability makes you "less than". My son is not "less than" and the solution is simple – challenge our perceptions and raise your expectations of people with disabilities can accomplish.

As a mother it is my role to equip my son with every tool that he needs to achieve his desired level of success. Whether he aspires to assemble pizza boxes or dreams of becoming the President of the United States, it is my responsibility to support his journey, but it is ultimately his determination that will pave the way to his success. You may never get the chance to meet my son, but you are a part of helping to make the world and workplace more welcoming to other individuals with disabilities.

In celebrating NDEAM, let us commit to being better humans who recognize and champion the vast possibilities that individuals with disabilities offer for a more inclusive and brighter future.

My son is EXTRA, not less.