

The “Dub!” Factor

PUBLIC IMAGES vs. **PERSONAL SELF-ESTEEM**

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

There are “*Dub!*” moments every day in the Disability World. An informational brochure from a particular disability organization evoked a “*Dub!*” from my lips recently. (I’ll call the disability described in the brochure the “XYZ syndrome.”)

The organization’s brochure described the XYZ syndrome as “one of the most devastating of all birth defects.” A menu of the “damaging” effects of the XYZ syndrome included: “problems” with learning, language development, social and emotional abilities, and more. Secondary consequences included certain physical “problems,” as well as “depression and social and sexual issues.”

This laundry-list of “problems” was followed by the recommendation that attention should be paid to the “psychological and social development” of people with this condition because many have “low self-esteem.” *Dub!* Why *wouldn’t* people with this condition feel badly about themselves, since the organization that “represents” them promotes such negative perspectives?

Many disability organizations do very good work on behalf of people with disabilities and their families. But how do we weigh their good works against the “ain’t it awful” approach they commonly use to raise money?

A few days ago (in May, 2001), I watched a TV interview with Jerry Lewis. The reporter focused on his longevity in show business. Then she gently brought up the criticism Lewis has received for promoting negative, stereotypical imagery during his annual telethon (including the paternalistic practice of referring to people of all ages who have muscular dystrophy as “Jerry’s Kids.”) He said he used pity because “it works,” and added, “OK, so you’re a cripple in a wheelchair and you don’t want to be pitied—then stay in your house!”

Millions of Americans saw this network television interview. Were they horrified by the words of Lewis, or did some think, “Well, he’s got a point . . .”? While Lewis receives criticism from many advocates, is *his* “pity approach” significantly different from the methods used by other disability organizations?

Children and adults with disabilities are in a daily battle with their greatest enemy: old attitudes and perceptions that marginalize and degrade them. When will we acknowledge that negative images of people with disabilities are often generated and maintained by the very organizations that purport to represent their interests—and what will we do to stop this soul-crushing practice?

*Charity
degrades those
who receive it
and hardens those
who dispense it.*

George Sand