



# First Person: ELIZABETH

## Perceptions and Impressions

As a woman in my early 40s with cerebral palsy, I can readily reflect on how I am perceived by those who are not disabled. I was born with cerebral palsy, which affects my motor skills. I contend that it is much easier to be born with a disability than to acquire one later in life—I don't know what it is like to be "normal."

I am very blessed in being more independent than I ever dreamed would be possible! I drive a regular car, work part-time for a law firm, and live alone with help from a wonderful outside support team. I'm active in my church and in community affairs, serving on the board of the Independent Living Center, as well as in other activities. I'm a member of a local United Cerebral Palsy sports team. As you can see, not much grass grows under my feet!

Throughout my life, I have encountered many and varied reactions to my disability. Some people see me as a person who happens to be disabled. It is wonderful to be around them. They accept me as "Elizabeth." Yes, my speech is, at times, difficult to understand. Yes, I'm in constant motion. But these people see me first and can look beyond my disability, many times forgetting it. I am able to be myself!

When I do need assistance, all I have to do is ask. I have a strong family pushing me to be as independent as possible. I'm grateful to my stepfather, who said, "You can do it!" My mother, afraid I might fall, was hesitant but supportive. My siblings have been great encouragers. I have many friends who are able to see beyond my disability.

I have also met people who have not been around individuals with physical disabilities. I can easily spot those who are uncomfortable around me. Sometimes, after being around me for a while, they may get used to me and then feel quite comfortable. In fact, when people

ask me to say something again, rather than nodding their heads pretending to understand me, it shows that they care enough about what I said to get it right.

From those who feel uncomfortable around me, I usually get one of two reactions: "Oh, you poor thing!" or "You're such an inspiration—you're a saint to have overcome cerebral palsy!" I realize people mean well, but I see right through their insecurities. Think about some of their comments. I'm not a "thing," I'm an individual. I have the same thoughts, dreams, and feelings as anyone else.

Many times I am perceived as being intellectually disabled, even though I have a college degree. When I'm in a restaurant, my friend may be asked, "What does she want?" One day I was getting into the driver's seat of my car, and a lady inquired, "Are you going to drive that car?" I kept quiet, but I thought, "No, it will drive itself!" Recently, while flying home from Salt Lake City, the flight attendant asked my friend if I understood how the oxygen worked. I chuckled to myself. I have been flying for over thirty years! Furthermore, my former roommate had lived with an oxygen tank for three years, and we were constantly checking the flow level. (In defense of airlines, I must say that I have been treated with great respect.)

For those who say I am an inspiration, I can respond in one of two ways. I can take the comment as a sincere compliment and genuinely say, "Thank you." On the other hand, I can see it as an off-the-cuff remark. Those who say that I inspire them may be thinking, "I'm glad I'm not like her" or "Boy, she goes through so much to be here." As I stated earlier, I do things differently, and it takes me longer. But I have learned to be patient and the importance of a sense of humor. I am very grateful to have accomplished as much as I have.