

For this assignment, I chose the option to be wheelchair-bound for one consecutive hour. Personally, I was interested in understanding more than just the physical barriers that persons with disabilities face. I wanted to experience public interactions, so my friend Sophia and I borrowed a wheelchair and took it to the mall. As someone who greatly enjoys shopping and spending time with my friends, I expected that this trip would be fun. That assumption was half wrong. What I experienced was the normal mix of girls' day fun, but mixed with frustration, personal discomfort, and emotional distress. Despite all the negatives, or because of them, it was definitely a positive learning experience.

As far as physical limitations are concerned, what was most frustrating was most definitely how inaccessible some stores were, as well as how difficult it was to shop when my friend and I were not in the same part of the store. Some of the stores had packed so many clothing racks into their space that I was rolling over the edges of whatever clothing touched the ground [even accidentally pulling some of them completely off the rack]. And even worse, there were areas between the racks that the width of my wheelchair simply would not fit through. I was unable to even get to the customer service counter in one store, it was so cramped. Some of the clothing racks were also at a height that made it impossible to pull down an article of clothing without pulling it off the hanger (I could not pull the hanger high enough to get it off the rack). I could only reach the bottom half of shelves in Target and Ross, and so needed assistance reaching most of the items I just wanted to *look* at. Moving myself out of the wheelchair to use the public restroom was also a challenge. I am fairly strong, so I can't even imagine how hard this task would be for someone who is more frail than I.

When it came to how people treated me, I was appalled. There seemed to be four types of people I encountered: 10% who were polite and treated me like a person, 10% who tried to treat me nicely but instead were quite condescending, 50% who averted their eyes and pretended that I was not there, and 30% who stared at me like there was something "wrong" with me because [I assume] they are uncomfortable with others whom are different from themselves. The last 30% made my heart sink. I felt as though I were being judged; some of the looks seemed to say "how dare you be in public." The amount of help I received when I needed it was also disheartening. Most people would see me struggling to reach something or with trying to move my wheelchair and would just continue on their way. There was one gentleman who moved a rack of clothing for me so that I could get through. And there was a lady who approached me to pull something from a shelf that I could not reach. Beyond those two good souls, there was a handful of other people who made it clear that they would be good enough to assist me. One thing that was wonderful, however, was that no one made mention of the wheelchair. No one asked why I wasn't walking. No one asked me what was "wrong" with me. No one verbally treated me with contempt.

It saddens me that persons are treated and viewed negatively based on being different from the “norm.” Having a disability does not make anyone less a person, though being treated like less most definitely makes the victim feel that they *are* less. In my opinion, the only thing that truly makes someone less a person is being the one who views others in a negative light, especially those who act and emanate those views.