

“I want my daughter to live as a healthy person does, and enjoy a happy life because she is only going to live once.” This is what Iris’s dad told me. What did he mean by that?

Iris is a unique girl I met at the Special Olympics. Thanks to her, I had a chance to think about what having a handicap means. It changed the way I think about people in her position.

One day during class, we discussed a man called Jammal Charles, who is a famous football player with an intellectual disability. My teacher asked us,

“What would you do if you, someone in your family, or one of your friends faced such a challenge?” I couldn’t give her a proper answer. I felt like I was living in a different world from them.

My friends said people with disabilities and their families were hopeless, because they look and act differently from us. I myself had never considered the issue.

Even when the class was over, the question that my teacher asked us still lingered in my mind.

Then this summer I had a chance to volunteer at the Special Olympics. It is the biggest sports organization for children and adults with disabilities such as Down syndrome.

Moving the benches, counting the seats for incoming viewers and cheering on the athletes was part of my work.

While I was setting up the field, a girl asked me if I wanted help.

This girl was Iris (pause) and she was one of the competitors. I replied, “No, thank you” to her, because I thought she wasn’t strong enough.

That was the first time I had ever spoken to a person with a disability.

When Iris showed up on the volleyball court I cheered for her inside my heart. She had a very serious look on her face.

I watched her try to keep the ball in the air by setting it high up with her skinny arms.

When she made a mistake the coach got mad at her and she cried in frustration.

Whenever her team won a point, they gathered around and rejoiced.

During break time, Iris was handing out water bottles to her teammates and high-fiving them.

It was the exact same thing that I did when I played volleyball. She cares about people, she laughs, and she enjoys her life as I do. She was an ordinary girl.

I felt ashamed of myself for thinking that people with impairments were hopeless and different.

I remember my grandmother telling me not to look at them when they pass by me. Maybe she just didn't want me to stare.

Unfortunately, I feel that there are still many of us who just don't look at all. So many people tend to regard them as unrelated persons. Even though signs of them are everywhere we look. For instance, we often walk or park our bikes on Braille blocks without noticing.

I wondered to myself; how can we get rid of the social wall between people with disabilities and without? I think the most important thing is to show how much disabled people have influenced society.

For example, did you know that some of the first typewriters were invented to help blind people write properly? This is just one impact on society. There are many more.

We need to make an effort to understand more about them. This will help us build a better society.

Going back to the question my teacher asked us, now I can answer with confidence. I will open my mind and see things with my eyes without accepting stereotypes. I will take action. Because we only live once.