

What do you think about me?

My name is Chihiro. I am living strong and positive. I was born with a disability, and I have never felt weak or sorry for myself. Living in a wheelchair has always been my normal. It has taught me many things and brought me unique experiences.

As a disabled person, I have been stereotyped many times since I was little. Do you know “stereotype”? When we make general ideas about a group of people, that is a stereotype. Some common stereotypes are that Japanese people are shy and that men are strong-- but the truth is, not all Japanese people are shy, and not only men are strong! Stereotypes hurt people and create barriers. They overlook the unique characteristics that make us who we are. Even a casual comment can be painful for someone else. I’ve cried over the stereotypes that people have said about me. When I was little, I didn't like going out or meeting people. I didn't even like being seen by people.

“Can you walk? Do you want to walk?” are questions that people often ask me, whether it’s during class, during breaks at school, when I’m meeting someone for the first time, even at the supermarket. These questions are hurtful because I can't walk, and it's normal for me not to. I quickly learned that many people think that having a disability is not normal. But, what does “normal” actually mean? For me, living in a wheelchair is "normal", but for some people, walking is "normal." In this way, every person is different and every person is normal. You can't push your own idea of normal onto others.

My family would often say, “If someone looks at you, it's because you're attractive!” and “Chihiro is strong, don’t worry about it!”. Their words made me realize that I shouldn’t miss the chance to meet people, so I decided to face it. I noticed that when I meet people for the first time, they focus on my wheelchair. But, as we got to know each other, their stereotypes faded, and we became friends. Now, when someone says something hurtful to me, I remind myself that, even though I can’t walk, I am smart and unique.

Kunieda Shingo, a wheelchair tennis player, said, “Sometimes people say, 'playing tennis in a wheelchair is amazing.' It makes me uncomfortable. We're playing tennis just like other people." His experience shows another kind of stereotype. If you think that people with disabilities can’t do something, then you’ll be surprised. People are different in many ways, such as ethnicity, religion, and gender. We should get to know each person and find their strengths. This way, society can be brighter and more inclusive.

So, I'll ask again, "What do you think about me?" When I came on the stage, maybe some of you were thinking, "Oh, she’s doing her best in a wheelchair." But now, you might think, "Wow, she’s cheerful!" or “it's wrong to look at someone and only see their wheelchair”. As I said earlier, I am living strong and positive. Don’t you think it’s a waste to let stereotypes stop us from really knowing each other?

17番 川口 祐寛

山形市立第三中学校

Stereotypes