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Unless You Know Someone's Story, Don't 'Compliment' Them as Inspirational

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Unless You Know Someone's Story, Don't 'Compliment' Them as Inspirational

By Katherine Torres
UCF Forum columnist
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Katherine Torres is the facilities scheduler at UCF's Recreation and Wellness Center.

Calling someone who utilizes a wheelchair or someone who has some form of physical limitation "inspirational" is often an off-putting comment.

I don't want to be overly critical of those who use the term since I know they're trying to be supportive, but have you ever taken the time to ask someone how they feel when you say they're inspirational?

In talking with able-bodied individuals and other wheelchair users (like myself), I often hear mixed opinions on this topic. Able-bodied people think that people with physical disabilities carrying out daily tasks are inspirational, but all my friends who are wheelchair users all agree that we do not see ourselves as inspirational.

A co-worker recently asked me to attend an event with her and speak about my experience at the adaptive and inclusive recreation program at the University of Central Florida's [Recreation and Wellness Center](#). I arrived about 20 minutes early and caught a showing of Australian comedian and journalist Stella Young's TED Talk titled "I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much."

This nine-minute talk given from her wheelchair sounded like I was the one giving this speech. Young literally took every emotion and word out of my mouth regarding this topic. She mentions about how the people in her town wanted to give her a community-achievement award, but her family wasn't sure for what. She says she wasn't doing anything in her life that was out of the ordinary. She talks about how they wanted to give her this award apparently just for simply being disabled. She brings up how society has used the word "disability" to objectify those who are disabled.

After the video was over, the audience was asked how they felt about the video. One person raised her hand, grabbed the microphone, and said she disagreed with Young and that every person has their own battles and deserve to get that pat on the back and be told they are inspirational. My blood began to boil and my co-worker could see it in my face.

You may be wondering why her comment made me so mad. So here is my outlook on this topic.

One day I was out and about shopping at Target. I was casually looking through a rack of clothes when a woman in her mid-30s stopped by and said, "Oh, my gosh, you are such an inspiration!"

"Um. Okay?" I said.

I had no clue who this woman was and she clearly had no clue who I was. She doesn't know my condition or my past. She doesn't know what I can do and what I struggle with. Just because I was *independently* looking through a rack of clothes, just like everyone else in the store, I was suddenly an inspiration to her.

I know she was probably telling me this as a compliment, but that's not the kind of thing to compliment someone in a chair for.

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She was basically telling me that because I am in a wheelchair she couldn't imagine that I could be independent or go out and about to run errands by myself.

My story is a prime example of the message that Young was trying to interpret in her presentation. Strangers often go up to people with disabilities and make these “compliments,” when in reality they are objectifying our abilities.

I have many friends and family members who have all different kinds of conditions that cause them to have different physical limitations. I always make sure I get to know their story and fully understand what their day-to-day lives are like.

To me, when my friends overcome something, they are my inspiration because I know what struggles they face. When a stranger comes up to me and says these things, I often respond with, “For what?” just to see what their response is.

My advice on this is: Unless you really know someone’s story, don’t just go up to them and call them inspirational.

But if I am doing something that motivates another person who has limitations to do it, too, then *that* to me is inspirational.

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