

Lives with Disabilities Still Hold Possibilities

La Columna Vertebral (The Support Column)

By Ellen Alderton

Democratic nations, such as the United States, defend the principle that each of us, regardless of our strengths and weaknesses, should enjoy inclusion in the broader community. Nevertheless, in the United States, some of the most vulnerable members of our society – people with disabilities – still experience widespread exclusion.

Many of us recall the great fanfare two years ago when 35 million Latinos in the United States proudly became this country's largest minority group. By contrast, few people probably realize that one of the largest demographic groups in this country is not an ethnic group, but rather, those 56 million people who live day-in and day-out with some type of physical, mental, or health disability.

In part, we may not notice that one in five people has a disability because often people with disabilities lead lives segregated from mainstream society. According to the National Organization on Disability, only 35 percent of disabled Americans, for example, have a job. Moreover, people with disabilities are twice as likely as other people to drop out of school, and they spend less time socializing, going out to eat in restaurants, or attending religious services. It is no surprise then that disabled people are half as likely as other citizens to feel satisfied with their lives.

Particularly in Latino cultures, families tend to circle around a loved one with a disability in order to protect that person; but, at the same time, these protective measures can lead to isolation. According to David Arocho, a social worker in New York who himself experiences a visual impairment, "One thing that happens, particularly in a Hispanic family, is that the family wants to solve the problem among themselves. I believe that, because of this, a lot of families don't look for help until it's absolutely necessary."

In fact, there are many resources in this country for people with disabilities. These range from advocacy groups such as the American Association for People with Disabilities, to social service and charity organizations such as the Centers for Independent Living or Special Olympics. In addition, local and state governments offer rehabilitation services, housing services, and sheltered or protected work options, as well as legal advice and support. ProyectoVision.net, a bilingual website, provides substantial information about services available to Latinos with disabilities and their families.

In the legal arena, the United States has played a leading role in promoting civil rights for people with disabilities. In 1990, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a groundbreaking piece of legislation that has served as a model for other governments around the world. The ADA requires that all Americans with disabilities receive special accommodations in the areas of employment, public services, housing and telecommunications. For more information in Spanish about protections offered under the ADA, visit http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/publicat_spanish.htm.

As we approach the New Year and ponder not only our resolutions, but also our hopes for the future, let us take a moment to consider that, for many Americans with disabilities, their own hopes have yet to be realized. As Nancy Lee Head, an advocate for people with mental illness says, “With the passing of years, we sometimes have to redefine our goals. At times, our dreams are delayed, deferred or denied.”

If you or someone you love has a disability, take time to learn about the various resources available to help you in this country. When people with disabilities become full and active members of society, we all win. Our world can only be at its best when we benefit from the talents and contributions of every member of our human community.