

FOREWORD

WHEN JOHN KEMP asked me to write this foreword, I remembered back to when John and I first met in the 1980s in Chicago. I was attending a performance of *Staring Back*, a play dealing with disabilities issues, after having just completed my first film, *Children of a Lesser God*, and John was a young executive with the National Easter Seal Society. We have been friends ever since. In more recent years, I served on the VSA Arts Board while John was serving as the chief executive officer at VSA Arts, an international organization founded by Jean Kennedy Smith in 1974 that creates learning opportunities through the arts for people with disabilities.

When John told me about the plans for *Reflections from a Different Journey*, it sounded interesting. But I was uncertain about it because I was concerned that many people might write to complain about the misdeeds of their parents. This probably occurred to me because now that I am a parent of three children, I sometimes wonder how my kids will remember my efforts. Once I had read a few of the essays, my uncertainty was replaced by excitement, admiration, and pride. When I read John's essay ("Disability Culture") about how his dad demonstrated the importance of public service with his own commitment to service to others, I gained a new appreciation of how John became the wonderful national leader that he continues to be.

In this book, people with all kinds of disabilities make clear that they can be capable role models for children; advisors to their parents and family members; and teachers to educators, health care professionals, and the many other adults who provide services for children with disabilities and their families. In fact, the essays have important messages for all of us as we strive to make our world a more caring, loving, and peaceful place for all children and families.

This book is a wonderful celebration of diversity. The essay writers have grown up with many different kinds of disabilities in many different places, including some countries outside the United States. They are not people who have “overcome” their disabilities. Rather, they have overcome the prejudices of society that all too often stereotype people with disabilities in destructive ways.

As some essay authors describe, they could also have become victimized by another kind of prejudice—the prejudice of prognosis. But, their parents did not accept the predictions of well-intentioned physicians and other professionals. With the love and support of their parents, they were not imprisoned by dire prognoses. Instead, they were encouraged to dream, to try, to make mistakes, to be active participants in the life of their families and communities, and to reject the limitations suggested by scientific and clinical stereotypes. With the help of these essay writers, I hope that “helping professionals” will appreciate that their prognoses may be based on “truths” that have taken years to evolve, may be based on prejudicial attitudes, and may no longer be accurate.

As a person with a disability, I have not overcome my deafness. Nor have I tried to pass as a person without a disability. I am often considered a role model for children growing up with disabilities or called a “representative” of people with disabilities. In these roles, I do my best to remind the world that there are many, many fine people with disabilities who are wonderful role models. These other role models don’t happen to enjoy the fame that I do because I won an Academy Award when I was only twenty-one years old and have continued to be a working actress in Hollywood—despite dire pre-

dictions that I would never work in Hollywood again and that I only won an Academy Award out of pity. I am an actress who happens to be deaf. Like the essay authors in this book, I have encountered many barriers along the way. At times, I believed what some people said—that I would never be a success in the acting field because I am deaf.

But, as a child with a disability, I was fortunate to grow up in a wonderful, supportive, and loving family. My family encouraged me to not let my disability stand in my way. Although I sometimes experienced frustration related to being deaf, thanks to my family, I felt secure and enabled. With family and community support, I realized that my own attitude about myself was critical to my success. I could make my own successes happen and my dreams come true.

Each essay in this book offers a great deal because the authors have given of themselves to benefit all of us. But I am not going to describe how I reacted to any specific essays, because I want each parent-reader to experience each one—and then share personally meaningful essays with grandparents, other family members, and friends. However, I do want to single out those essays dealing with intimacy and sexuality because they remind us that all human beings need physical and emotional intimacy, love, and respect.

Besides my friend John Kemp, my life has previously been touched by two of the essay authors. In 1994, along with former Miss America Heather Whitestone, I presented an Equality, Dignity, and Independence Award from the National Easter Seal Society to Jason Kingsley and his coauthor, Mitchell Levitz, for their fine book, *Count Us In: Growing Up with Down Syndrome* (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994). In 1996, my biography was included in *Extraordinary People with Disabilities* (Children's Press, 1996), written by Deborah Kent and Kathryn A. Quinlan. Having recently written a novel called *Deaf Child Crossing* (Simon & Schuster, 2002), I appreciate that writing is hard work.

In Deborah and Kathryn's book, they describe how people with disabilities were considered "useless burdens on society" for thou-

sands of years. In that context, anything a person with a disability managed to accomplish was perceived as amazing. They then write that the title of their book is ironic because, in recent years, people with disabilities have worked very hard to be perceived as regular, ordinary people. Similarly, in the introduction to *Reflections from a Different Journey*, the editors describe the essayists as “relatively ordinary, accomplished individuals”—not superstars. From my own experience, I know that there are many more people with disabilities who have a great deal to offer all of us who are parents and who want our children to learn from the wonderful diversity of our world.

There continue to be unnecessary gaps between people with disabilities and those without disabilities. I am confident that this book will encourage people to get to know some people with disabilities and to find out that we are just like other people—human beings doing our best. If anyone still wonders about the roles that people with disabilities can play in making our world a better place for all people to thrive, this book will convince such skeptics that we are ready, willing, and able. Finally, I hope that readers with disabilities will share the “disability pride” I feel because of the caring and sharing by the essay authors.

In the end, I am reminded of the words of the biblical prophet Micah when he said, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” In the context of this book, I hope we will all come to understand that there is room on our earth for all of us, regardless of our perceived abilities.

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