

Diversity Gazette

Truly inclusive spaces, places and hearts

by Amy Wade

So often, in raising our collective conscious, we become hyper aware of the visible forms of -isms such as sexism and racism, while other isms, such as ableism, are quietly operating under the radar. I am learning through my personal journey to be more mindful of less direct, albeit still challenging forms of *-isms*.

This year, my very handsome, funny, athletic and truly enjoyable (well, as enjoyable as a 15-year-old teenager can be!) son, Malcolm, was diagnosed with epilepsy. I will forever remember the moment I got the call about his first seizure and again the way my heart broke months later when an official diagnosis came. However, I am among "the lucky ones," a person living with privilege and who possesses the social capital necessary to advocate for her child. I had this handled, right?

Before even processing his feelings or my own I instantly starting mapping out how my advocacy would tangibly play out in a 504 medical plan for school, at his work, and any other necessary protections he would need.

Then, I was blind sighted. My child was refusing to meet with a counselor, school nurse and teachers, and was adamant about not being put on a medical 504. He didn't want me to tell friends, his basketball coach, or extended family members. He was also in denial talking as if he could get a driver's permit soon which I knew was impossible. I could not understand why he was so resistant to owning this journey and stepping into a place of "despite this challenge." Afterall, he is

a scholar, an athlete, and a budding leader the community. I felt unappreciated for all the work I did to show up as the best parent I could. And then the words hit me, "Mom, did you know that epilepsy can be considered a disability? Do you know they call it seizure disorder?"

"Ableism is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require 'fixing' and defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, ableism classifies entire groups of people as 'less than,' and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of people with disabilities." (Accessliving.com) Malcolm was very sensitive to this and while my initial response was for him to stand in his power, he didn't want to be labeled or known as a kid possessing a "health impairment" that made him eligible for any special services. Being a teenager is hard enough. He didn't want his friends, his teachers, his coaches to see him as *less than*.

And in that moment, I realized I too need multiple iterations of learning when it comes to -isms. While we have settled into a successful academic year with Malcolm making the varsity basketball team, working, and doing a great job at making friends with kids who can drive (whew!), I hope this story encourages you to engage in self-reflection of the many -isms our friends, colleagues and communities visibly *and invisibly* negotiate and that you, too, can be even more open to reflecting on all those who benefit, whether visibly or invisibly, from truly inclusive spaces, places and hearts.