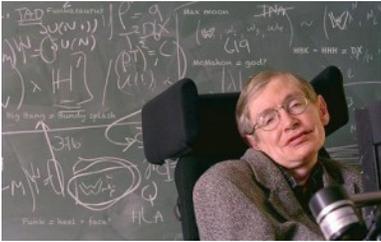


# CAC Corner: Potential, Not Limitations | CPD

Mary Kava

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Famed physicist Stephen Hawking, who has ALS

*By Mary Kava*

“The only disability in life is a bad attitude.” — Scott Hamilton

Recently, I heard a young person say that they did not want anyone to know they had a disability as they felt people would look at them differently and place limitations on them. It saddened me to hear this young person talk this way, but also I can understand their apprehension in letting others know. Society tells us to look at the whole person and not just the adjectives that we use to describe them. Like the old saying goes, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” People are more than just the adjectives that we use to describe them. For example, a person who needs to use a wheel chair may be limited in performing certain functions that a person who can walk may be able to do, but can be capable of doing things that the walking person cannot do. Yet, as this young person pointed out, adjectives that society uses to put a label on a person can be hard to overcome. Adjectives are words with limits and do not embrace all that the person with a disability is or can do.

More than 23 years ago, I worked as an aide/job coach at a high school with students who were the first to be “mainstreamed” in that district. Tracy was a very shy, quiet young girl with Down syndrome. Tracy had a supportive family. Our first job training was at a local grocery store. The district “specialist” told the storeowner that all Tracy would be able to do was dust the shelves. I knew that she could do more. They were stocking that day and I asked Tracy to pick up a can of vegetables from a box on the floor and place it where it belonged on the shelf.

She quickly matched the label. I received a stern look from the “specialist,” but was so proud of Tracy for showing that she was capable of more. After a few more days at the store, Tracy taught me something. She had figured out on her own that the bar code numbers on a can or package matched the bar code numbers on the shelf. As a shopper for lots of years, I never knew that. Tracy went on to graduate and got a full-time job as a cashier for a company that made irrigation equipment. Had she not had a supportive, encouraging family but instead had limits been placed on her potential that the “specialist” wanted to do, I often wonder where she might have ended up.

Recently I read two articles regarding not putting limits on people, but rather to look at their potential. Congresswoman McMorris Rogers called on “Americans to define people based on their potential not limits” and California Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom said, “parents should encourage their child to celebrate all of their interesting differences; they make us unique, and who wants to be like everyone else.” These are two good reminders that everyone has potential that should not be limited.

Disabilities come in many forms. Some we can see and some we cannot, but whatever form they take, they are not the whole person and should not be used to limit a person’s potential to contribute to society. History is full of individuals with disabilities who have made phenomenal contributions to the world. This list includes people like Stephen Hawking, Helen Keller, Albert Einstein, Amadeus Mozart, Daryl Hannah, Abraham Lincoln, Buzz Aldrin, Diana Princess of Wales, Winston Churchill, Mike Wallace, Hank Williams, Sr., Stephen Hopkins, Sr. Isaac Newton, Napoleon Bonaparte, Charles Dickens, Alexander the Great, Cher, Magic Johnson, Whoopi Goldberg, Walt Disney, Jay Leno and Thomas Edison, just to name a few.

(Check out this link to learn more [http://www.disabled-world.com/artman/publish/article\\_0060.shtml](http://www.disabled-world.com/artman/publish/article_0060.shtml).)

If these people had not had determination and support, but had their potential limited, our society may not look like it does today. We may not have many of the conveniences we take for granted like the telephone if scientists like Einstein and Edison had been denied the opportunity to create what they did because their potential been limited. America may not have become the great nation it is because individuals like Stephen Hopkins had not drafted and signed the Declaration of Independence.

This also causes one to wonder what we have lost because so many other individuals with disabilities have had their potential limited by society (families, teachers, etc.). Before one puts a limit on any individual, we need

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to stop and think what this person's potential really is and encourage them to reach for the stars. Who knows, they may be the person who finds a cure for cancer.