



# Gearing Up For Your Transitions

Marissa L. Band

## Personal Story

*Marissa L. Band, Esq., a Staff Attorney with the Disabilities Law Program of Community Legal Aid Society, Inc., reflects on growing up with a disability and how that influenced her career:*

I was diagnosed with arthritis as a very young child. You generally cannot tell by looking at me that I have a disability, so throughout my life I have periodically run into discrimination on account of having an “invisible” disability. As a child, I recall having other children disbelieve that my condition existed and tell me that I was making it up to get out of running the mile in gym class. As an adult, I have been in situations where I am given a hard time if I need to sit instead of stand, such as on a bus or at the legislature, or, request assistance with my baggage while taking a flight. All because people assume that because I am young, I must be healthy. Rather than allow these instances to get me down, I try to turn them into opportunities to educate others about disabilities, whether it was my classmates as a child, the airlines as an adult (and yes, this did also lead to me getting free miles from the airline!), or in my career as a disability rights attorney.

Most importantly, my experience has taught me an important lesson: you can never assume you know what someone else is going through. There are many “unseen” burdens that we carry: disabilities, stress from living without adequate financial means, violence at home, or a multitude of other trials. Thus I always strive to be open-minded and actively listen to others. If someone is acting unkind, or misses an appointment, it may be because they have difficult burdens weighing them down. Thus, rather than just being something bad that happened to me, growing up with arthritis has taught me to have a great deal of empathy for others. I do my best to understand their experience, and treat them as I would want to be treated if I was in their situation. The ability to have empathy is a huge asset to me in my job as my clients often have had difficult lives, and/or need my services because they are facing a very emotional and stressful legal experience.

Of course having a disability has led, and continues to lead me to have some struggles. In school, I required accommodations. Even with accommodations, I vividly remember my hands being so sore during law school exams that my husband had to tie my shoes for me! It can be difficult to focus and study when you are in pain. Despite this, I worked hard and committed myself to my education... and was able to graduate from law school in the top 10% of my class. After graduation, I won a nationally competitive legal fellowship, and began my work with the Disabilities Law Program in Delaware, where I was later hired as a Staff Attorney.

Ultimately, I see my disability as both a burden and an asset. It is a burden when I have to use sick time for medical care, to take time off during a serious flare-up of my condition, or to work through the pain (because life needs to go on!). However, it is an asset because I use my understanding that we all have burdens to help motivate me to continue to work hard. I have gotten myself to where I am and I can therefore continue to go farther. It is a benefit to me

because it was a major contributing factor to my pursuit of a legal career, and influenced my choice to work for an organization that advocates for individuals with disabilities. My disability gave me direction, guided my career path, and shaped me into an empathetic advocate; for that, I am thankful.