

Silicon Valley Independent Living Center

A disability justice organization that creates fully inclusive communities



Photos by Tom Olin

SVILC's POSITION STATEMENT AGAINST SIMULATION EXERCISES

Disability justice organization calls for an end to the practice of simulation exercises, even as part of disability awareness

Simulation Devalues our Humanity

When a non-disabled person introduces him- or herself to a disabled person, that person replies, "Hi, my name is ____." Never will a disabled person reply, "Hi, my name is paraplegic, blind, or autistic." Answering by name is the instinctive and socially accepted response to how people (in Western cultures) identify themselves and socialize. Names connect our humanity because everyone has one, and they transcend many of the societal labels of race, class, gender and ability.

Go beyond the basics of social etiquette between disabled and non-disabled people, however, and that common thread of humanity is quickly frayed. For non-disabled people, meeting, socializing, and relating to a disabled person can be an unfamiliar and uncomfortable situation. Their interaction with a disabled person quickly evolves into not who we are, but how we function. When this happens, most unfortunately our humanity becomes an afterthought. Our differences become the distractions of dehumanization that breed ignorance, prejudice and discrimination. There are many leaders in the disability rights community who believe that the way to combat this from happening is to allow non-disabled people to "experience for themselves" what it is like to have a disability, by pretending to have one. This is the justification that is used to regard simulation exercises as an acceptable practice of disability awareness.

Disability, though, cannot be simulated. A person who can walk and sits in a wheelchair for fifteen minutes, or five hours, will still not know what it is like to live in a wheelchair. The same applies to blindfolding a sighted person to simulate blindness, or putting cotton balls in one's ears to try to understand what it is like to be deaf. All these exercises actually end up doing is emphasizing the differences that separate disabled from non-disabled, and instilling a sense of pity in the non-disabled person when the exercise is over, as they think "Gee, I'm sure glad I don't have a disability." Exclusion and pity: two barriers of integration for disabled people that already exist in society are actually reinforced by simulation exercises, the intended purpose of which is acceptance and inclusion.

This is why Silicon Valley Independent Living Center is calling for an end to simulation exercises. We are a disability justice organization that believes that disability is a natural and beautiful part of human diversity that should be celebrated, not fixed, cured or "normalized." We believe that disability should not be "understood," but rather, accepted. We as disabled people claim our place as

a distinct culture within society, with our own leaders, history, art, language, spirit, movement and identity. Just as any other race, gender, class or ethnicity exists in the world, so do we. But what other culture allows for the simulation of its people? Imagine the reaction to someone putting on brown makeup for fifteen minutes for a “Latino Awareness Day!”

What is it really accomplishing?

Prior to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, disabled people were disenfranchised due to lack of civil rights protections and physical barriers of access. Simulation exercises at that time served to demonstrate a real need for such things as ramped curb cuts and Braille elevator buttons. That time, however, has long since passed. As all movements evolve, so has ours, and the framework for achieving equality and integration has gone from a struggle of proving to the non-disabled world “We are just like you” to celebrating our differences with pride and self-acceptance, saying “No, we aren't just like you, and that is okay.”

This realignment of values and beliefs casts a new light on the act of disability simulation. The gathering of disabled people together, most popularly done as part of “disability awareness days” to demonstrate “how well” disabled people carry out basic tasks of daily living. Whether it be cooking or using a computer or demonstrating the use of some kind of adaptive equipment, the disabled person's life is reduced to whatever level of awareness or enlightenment the non-disabled person experiences, without ever really learning anything about the disabled person that could be truly relationship-building.

Thus, any form of simulation in the name of awareness is nothing more than a contemporary freak show. This spectacle of simulation and demonstration puts disabled people on display to “reassure” the non-disabled that they have no reason to fear interacting with us, or disability itself. The entire practice, however, does exactly the opposite of the stated goal. It plays on the fears and negative stereotypes of what it is to live with a disability.

Surprisingly, while the use of blindfolds and cotton balls are sometimes quickly called out as blatantly offensive, one simulation activity that is more widely accepted is athletic competitions such as wheelchair basketball. Proponents claim that the sport itself provides a “level playing field” not found in society. This “level playing field,” however, is purely based on brute physicality. Simply because a disabled person and non-disabled person can spar on a court or field, does not mean that the non-disabled person will finish the competition with any better understanding of what it is to be disabled. Again, the physicality is reduced to function.

Personal prejudices and institutional injustices of discrimination on behalf of a whole movement will not be settled between two people or two teams, whose only goal is a “win.” The 1973 “Battle of the Sexes” tennis match between champions Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King puts this point into historical context. Riggs, 55 years old at the time, came out of retirement to challenge one of the world's greatest female players to a prime-time nationally televised match, claiming that the female game was inferior and that a top female player could not beat him even at the age of 55. The stakes were just as high off the court as they were on. King carried the significance of what many women had been fighting for in the Equal Rights Amendment of 1972. Although passed by Congress, getting each state to ratify the legislation was an uphill battle, King won the “Battle of the Sexes” handily, beating Riggs in straight sets. Yet what did this win do for the progress of the women’s movement?

Did it secure equal pay for women? Did it end sex discrimination in the workplace? Did it address the humanity of women seeking equal status and representation in a male-dominated society? Or rather, did it just show that on one night, in one sport, a woman can win and a man can lose? King may have won the “Battle of the Sexes” but the women’s movement suffered the real loss -- one that continues to this day.

Nothing About Us Without Us

The reality is that most simulation exercises are planned and orchestrated by non-disabled people. Their well-meaning intention is muted by the fact that they don’t have a disability themselves. Therefore, they don’t understand how simulation exercises are inherently offensive and inimical to their purported goal of true and authentic disability awareness.

We understand and accept that the disability community is not a monolith, and therefore we welcome open expression and free-flowing dialogue. However, we also advocate for a strong solidarity within our community. If something is offensive to one of us, its offense should be recognized and acknowledged by all, and alternative options adopted if a unanimous resolution cannot be reached. In short, every voice must be heard. To not embrace this philosophy means that disabled people are being hypocritical. Historically nondisabled people have made decisions that impact our lives without inviting us to the table. We need to be aware and hyper-critical of this behavior within our own community.

Internalized Oppression

The justification that simulation exercises are an acceptable practice often occurs because of a misguided endorsement from disabled people stemming from their own internalized oppression. Feelings, attitudes and beliefs of shame, self-loathing and brokenness prevent a disabled person from being critical of simulation exercises and their purpose. Simulation exercises provide a cyclical framework of negative stereotypes and indignity that in turn, reinforce internalized oppression which enable an environment for simulation exercises to exist in the first place.

It is time to end this cycle of pity. Breaking the cycle begins by disabled people rejecting the notion that our differences are bad in any way, and building internal strength through consciousness-raising around disability identity, that is, accepting yourself and your disability. With a defiant sense of celebration, we exclaim we are “Disabled and proud!” With this pride comes the realization that we do not need anyone to pretend to live as we do (as is done in simulations) to command the acceptance, respect and value of our life, as anyone else in the world.

A quote by disability rights and independent living advocate Adolf Ratzka states succinctly about positive disability identity, culture and pride: *“As long as we regard our disabilities as tragedies, we will be pitied. As long as we feel ashamed of who we are, our lives will be regarded as useless. As long as we remain silent, we will be told by others what to do.”*

Proud and Progressive, This is Our Vision

Martin Luther King is quoted as saying “You can't legislate attitudes.” The passage of the ADA was undoubtedly a watershed moment in the disability rights movement. This legislation, however, does nothing to address the discriminatory attitudes and negative stereotypes that continue to undermine the protections of the law; ultimately harming lives of disabled people with extreme consequence.

At SVILC we believe with Gandhi that “we must be the change we want to see in the world.” This means working toward a vision of what we believe true equality and full integration means for disabled people in society. We envision a future where there is no longer fear and discrimination, where there is no more shame and oppression, where all people with non-apparent disabilities disclose with pride that they are disabled. Abolishing simulation exercises is an important first step in this process.

We believe authentic awareness happens when non-disabled people take a sincere interest in our culture and the needs and concerns of our community. This can be done by learning our history, having open dialogues about our life experiences, and interpersonal interaction at work, in school and throughout society. Over time a relationship of mutual respect and shared values will be built. This will be the foundation of a fully integrated society that will result in true equality in access, education, employment, housing, justice and opportunity in all things for all people with disabilities.

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SVILC is a cross-disability, intergenerational, and multicultural disability justice organization that creates fully inclusive communities that value the dignity, equality, freedom and worth of every human being. We do this by building disability identity, culture and pride; creating opportunities for personal and community transformation; and partnering with others to ensure that civil and human rights are protected. For more information go to www.svilc.org.