



Disabilities

Lilibeth Navarro's dedication to the Disability Rights Movement shows how much a person can affect changes by living spiritually.

By Susanne Janssen

In the U.S. more than 12,000 teenagers used Botox injections in 2009, and many consider undergoing cosmetic surgery to improve their looks. To be successful and important, to lead a fulfilled and happy life, you have to be beautiful, society says.

Lilibeth Navarro struggled with similar pressures as a teenager. "All the women in my family were very beautiful." She herself was confined to a wheelchair, having contracted polio at the age of five. The disease left its marks on her body, and later on her soul.

Her grandmother kept on saying that she was "special," but as a teenager, she didn't want to be "special" — she wanted to be doing all the normal things: going out with friends, dancing, dating and dreaming of a future family.

"Every person has value and dignity," she says today, describing how her discovery of God's personal love changed her life. To respond to it she wanted to show "God's face to the world," and this has remained her life's work ever since.

After studying business in the Philippines, she found an opportunity to pursue journalism in the U.S. In her first job after her degree, she became acutely aware of how many things were not accessible to her and to other disabled people. Joining a demonstration in Los Angeles in 1985 under the slogan "Access is a civil right," she became active in the Disability Rights Movement. Before long she took on a leadership role.

Her work is not limited to speeches and conferences. As she learned from Focolare founder Chiara Lubich, "You have to think big for God."

In 2000, when Lilibeth was asked to open an Independent Living Center (ILC) in Los Angeles, she agreed without hesitating. One person in charge was a former supervisor who had fired her in Los Angeles. "You?" this woman exclaimed as Lilibeth was introduced to her as the new founder of the ILC in Los Angeles. "Yes," replied Lilibeth, without any bitterness.

In the nearly 10 years since its opening, the ILC has grown from 7 to 16 employees, from 7 core programs to now 13 programs, and is a central point for all people with temporary or permanent disabilities. Its name, CALIF, stands for "Communities Actively Living Independent and Free," and it is located in a historic building on Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles. It aims to help disabled persons live independently in their own apartment with assistance.

"In a nursing home, you can't even choose at what time you want to get up or go to bed," she explains. "That is not a self-determined life."

After a warm welcome, Lilibeth guides me to her office as her colleagues work in other areas of the center. People arrive to get advice about government assistance and information about technical help available.

“We have a loan program for equipment that people cannot afford,” she says. There is also the latest technology she likes to share with her clients: an app that facilitates communication to those with speech impediments after a stroke. “I had a woman in my office who after a stroke thought all was ended, but that’s not true. Technology is on our side,” she affirms. “We are always looking for solutions.”

To really effect change, you cannot limit your dedication to a cause or the group you care about. In LA County, about 180,000 homecare workers assist people with disabilities. A few years ago, most of them were working without health insurance, because although the government paid them, it did not officially employ them.

“A lot of the other disabled persons didn’t want more rights for the homecare workers, because they were afraid of a possible strike,” Lilibeth explains. She found herself caught in a dilemma but prayed about it. She felt that love resolved the conflict for her by thinking in terms of a “consistent ethic of social justice.” She shared with them this way of thinking and got the support for the initiative to establish an employer of record so that personal care attendants can bargain for better wages and benefits.

“The homecare workers help us every day, and I cannot fight for my rights at the expense of other people,” she said. Now the workers are better paid and have health insurance. She also tried to unify different opinions inside the disability movement because the needs of some disability groups were opposed to each other. Eliminating a barrier for people in wheelchairs, for example, caused orientation problems for the blind. “If we cannot understand the needs of the other disabled, how can we require society to understand us?” she asks.

At the CALIF office, some workers use their lunch break once a week for a spirituality meeting, sharing their thoughts and their experiences of living out their faith. From their faces, you can see that they enjoy working here.

Lilibeth has won several awards, including the Los Angeles County Commission on Disability Recognition Award in 1999. She was named “Woman of the Year” by the California State Legislature — something she would never have expected as a child, having felt discriminated against and rejected by others. In December 2010, the Philippine government named her one of 24 Most Outstanding Filipinos Overseas.

For her, this is all a result of trusting in God’s love. “That’s what happens when you use your talents for something that is bigger than you,” she says. With her example, she encourages a lot of people, with and without disabilities. She always tries to see the positive. “As a disabled person, I always experience the providence of God.”

Lilibeth always felt that Jesus had a special love for people with disabilities. “It’s all so evident in the Gospel,” she said, “Jesus would heal the disabled he encountered everywhere!” But, she added, “there’s also meaning in suffering that doesn’t go away — a permanent disability is a chance to say ‘yes’ to God everyday.”

She shared this discovery with a Muslim colleague in the disability community. Moved by the story, he began to search the Qu’ran for a similar story, and he was excited to find a verse where Mohammed encounters a blind person and is corrected by God toward a change of heart, directing him to give the blind man honor and respect.

The dignity of all human life is common ground from which to start and the goal to reach in this change of attitude toward those with disabilities,” she says.

As she continues the daily struggle with disability, “There are a lot of things in my heart I still have to change,” she says. Her life choices have brought change to many other hearts as well.

Inclusiveness. Lilibeth Navarro is convinced that real change comes about when you go beyond your own immediate concerns to include those who seek justice in other areas of inequality as well.

Advocating. Fighting for higher wages and benefits for the wheelchair assistants at Los Angeles airport

There's also meaning in suffering that doesn't go away.

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