

The “R” Word: Hurtful. Demeaning. Unnecessary

Submitted by **Sabrina Umstead Smith**

Hearing it actually raises the little tiny hairs on the back of my neck. Add to that my stomach begins to churn and bubble while my blood pressure rises and if my skin were lighter you could see my face turn beet red.

What on earth makes you look and feel that way you ask? Words. Specifically use of the word “retarded” or the words “mentally retarded.”

Yes I’m guilty. I used the words when I was younger, making fun of others not knowing any better 30 years or so ago.

Then I learned how painful these words are. You see my son was diagnosed with Mental Retardation (MR) (in 1989) and people said things like, “What’s wrong with him?” Imagine that, someone suggesting to you your child has something wrong with them? My response would be, “There’s nothing ‘wrong’ with him. His abilities are different than yours and mine he is differently able.”

I still hear it frequently — people referring to someone as retarded or mentally retarded, stupid or dumb. So allow me to share what I’ve lived and learned about these words and terms that just plain hurt.

Mental Retardation (MR) or mentally retarded were medical terms used for clinical purposes. Doctors, psychologists and other medical professionals used MR to describe people with significant intellectual impairments.

In today’s society they are used to degrade and insult people with intellectual differences. The R word and the MR words are also used as synonyms for dumb or stupid by people without disabilities. In either situation or circumstance they are hurtful terms that dehumanize a person who is differently able.

I overheard a woman at the supermarket recently having an aggressively loud conversation on her cell phone calling someone “R” repeatedly. Does saying that make one feel superior or give one power over another human being? I certainly hope not.

I hurriedly walked away blood boiling, beet red and stomach churning and decided ENOUGH ALREADY I’m going to do something about this. People need to know that using these words significantly hurts any human being.

On October 5, 2010, President Obama signed bill S.2781 into federal law. This law is named after Rosa Marcellino and removes ,”mental retardation” and “mentally retarded” from federal health, education and labor policy and replaces them with people first language, “individual with an intellectual disability” and intellectual disability.

By sharing these nuggets of knowledge about the MR and R words hopefully you will begin to think before uttering those terms again, or better yet begin to remove them from your conversation.

Now, please take a moment and visit www.r-word.org where you will learn even more about the “Spreading the Word to End the Word” campaign. I ordered my shirt today and will continue to use my voice to educate the masses. Hope you join in — when you know better you do better.

About the Author:

Sabrina Umstead Smith is an experienced manager who has worked for top corporations. She’s a self-starter who runs her own nonprofit. She’s a gifted speaker who connects with both audiences and individuals.



And that’s just the start.

A woman of many skills and great character, Sabrina built a charitable organization almost singlehandedly. The initiative evolved into a more personal calling: She now coaches others toward realizing their potential, and helps liberate them from the obstacles in their path.

Sabrina’s focus is shaped by unfathomable tragedies, and the work she did to survive them.

In 1988, Sabrina lost her husband in an apartment fire. Six months pregnant at the time, Sabrina was told her baby’s health had been severely compromised. Her son, Erick, was born with cerebral palsy and only lived to age 3.

Sabrina gave her son a meaningful legacy through Erick’s Place, a charity she founded to help chronically ill children and their caregivers. In running the nonprofit, she applied the organizational and leadership experience she honed over 25 years at Verizon and affiliated corporations.

Although skills and experience have taken Sabrina a long way, the power of determination has taken her even farther. And it’s her mission to help others transcend pain and self-blame to achieve happy, successful lives.

Sabrina is the creator of Forgive 4 U, a program that defines the six essential steps to overcome emotional roadblocks. She coaches clients one-on-one and spreads the Forgive 4 U principles through professional speaking engagements.

To learn more about Sabrina’s efforts visit her at www.ericksplace.org

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