

# OpeningREMARKS

## TURNING ACCESS INTO SUCCESS

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT POTENTIAL, IT'S OFTEN IN THE CONTEXT OF SPORTS, BUT CAN REFER to just about anything: He has all-star potential; she showed such potential. As members of a society interminably tangled up in our own popular culture, we often fancy ourselves in the role of judges on a reality TV show, casting opinions on whether someone exceeded our expectations or disappointed us by not living up to our "established" standards.

For anyone with a disability, this armchair umpiring comes as no surprise. People with disabilities have long been at the forefront of dispelling myths and preconceived notions about their abilities. But what we, as a society, have often done is fail to even consider their potential. We have overlooked, neglected, or excluded them, out of our own ignorance—and to our own detriment. My sister, who has worked for decades with people who have severe developmental disabilities, taught me years ago about the importance of recognizing people with disabilities on their own terms, rather than ours. Unfortunately, when we encounter people or issues that we know little about, we often react out of fear, making uninformed judgments that disregard individual circumstances and personal understanding. In the documentary film *Wretches & Jabberers*, produced by School of Education Dean Douglas Biklen G'73, the two main characters—advocate Tracy Thresher and artist Larry Bissonnette—take their autism on the road, traveling the world in hopes of enlightening people's attitudes about the condition. "To move people's knowledge of disability to a positive place" is how Thresher describes the purpose of their journey.

For decades, disability rights advocates have worked to reach that "positive place." As the feature article "Access and Opportunity" attests, the legacy of the disability rights movement here at Syracuse University lives on, continuing to forge ahead on numerous fronts, from classroom innovations to entrepreneurial ventures. By ensuring access and opportunity for people with disabilities, we open new worlds not just for them, but for ourselves as well. By recognizing their strengths, we enrich all of our lives. And key to so much of this progress is education. By committing to education for all, we create opportunities for success. While success is never a given, it's hardly an option without access. And if we want to live up to our own expectations as a diverse, inclusive, civilized society, we need to do all we can to ensure that people with disabilities are accepted and recognized, and have the chance to reach their full potential and succeed. "Mankind expresses itself finely in variety," Bissonnette types into a computer screen in response to a young Japanese artist with autism who wonders why there are people with autism. "We are one branch of many on a long, lots of leaves, diverse, and wonderful beauty tree."



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