



John Franklin Stephens Become a fan Special Olympics Global Messenger

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I Am the Person You Hurt When You Say the R-Word

Sometimes I feel like Professor Van Helsing, or maybe Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I keep trying to kill this thing and it just won't die. Of course, my nemesis is the "r-word," not a vampire.

Like Dracula, the r-word just sucks the life out of those of us who fall in its path. It spreads like an infection from person to person. It seems as though perfectly nice people who "mean no harm" get bitten by hearing others using the term while "meaning no harm." And so it goes, from person to person, until it becomes so common that even Presidential Chiefs of Staff, radio talk show hosts, movie characters and famous political pundits use the nasty slur -- then say they "meant no harm."

To all of you who use it, let me say it one more time, **THE R-WORD HURTS**. You don't have to aim the word directly at me to hurt me and millions of others like me who live with an intellectual disability. Every time a person uses the r-word, no matter who it is aimed at, it says to those who hear it that it is okay to use it. That's how a slur becomes more and more common. That's how people like me get to hear it over and over, even when you think we aren't listening.

So, why am I hurt when I hear "retard." Let's face it, nobody uses the word as a term of praise. At best, it is used as another way of saying "stupid" or "loser." At worst, it is aimed directly at me as a way to label me as an outcast -- a thing, not a person. I am not stupid. I am not a loser. I am not a thing. I am a person.

It hurts me to think that people assume that I am less than a whole person. That is what is so awful about slurs. They are intended to make their target seem smaller, less of a person. People who live with an intellectual disability do not have an easy life. We have to fight to understand what the rest of you take for granted. We fight for education. We fight to live among the rest of you. We struggle to make friends. We often are ignored, even when we have something to say. We fight so hard to be seen as whole people. It hurts so much, after all that struggle, to hear you casually use a term that means that you assume we are less than whole.

How shall we respond to those of you who still use the r-word? Well, like Van Helsing and Buffy, we are going to aim at your heart. The only difference is that we are determined to drive a smile, not a stake, through your heart. Come join me on the side of the good guys. I promise you will feel better about yourself -- and no other people will have to feel bad about themselves.