

During the first of many summers spent at Camp JAM—Camp Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis and Me—I was asked to write a letter to my district representative to raise awareness about my illness. At eight years old, I dove into the task with childlike optimism, using my newfound cursive skills to carefully pen the phrases that I had seen on a laminated sheet on the table: JRA is an autoimmune disease where the body's immune system attacks its own healthy cells and tissues. It causes growth deformities in children, and that's why I struggle with basic tasks like walking and using my hands. My confidence faltered when Ashlynn, my camp counselor, instructed me to rewrite the letter and emulate a much younger child. "Sometimes," she explained, nudging me in the direction of a box of stickers, "our stories need special packaging to be noticed. Does that make sense?" I nodded but I didn't understand. If my words were convincing, why would the packaging matter?

I watched Ashlynn stuff a picture of me into the envelope, my face burning with the realization that only the visibly disabled campers had been photographed. I considered the photo, my gaze lingering on my bowling-ball-sized knees and bent-out-of-shape hands. Unlike the words I had so carefully crafted, any narrative that a stranger gleaned from my body would be beyond my control, informed only by their preconceptions of disability. Perhaps the "special packaging" of my words referred not just to stickers or crayons, but my own body. My theory was confirmed when, after a round of low-dose chemotherapy, virtually everything about my appearance changed. My bowling-ball knees became softballs, and my mobility aids began collecting dust in our basement next to my dad's Cubs bobbleheads. I was shocked to find that most people in my life were convinced that my disease had disappeared. Despite the persistence of my chronic pain, I was suddenly considered undeserving of

accommodations (“Those seats are for people who need them,” strangers would lecture me on public transportation) and even my own identity (“You can’t really call yourself disabled anymore,” insisted a range of classmates and friends). Each year at Camp JAM, I participated in letter-writing campaigns. Never again was I asked to include a photo with my letter, a fact that I realized with a sting of humiliation. Did my new appearance somehow negate my message? It seemed that my words no longer mattered when my body was not considered the right vessel for their delivery.

Determined to challenge this notion, I corrected prejudice whenever I encountered it. But as I began college and my professional career, I realized that these microaggressions were symptomatic of a larger ignorance that threatens the ability of those with invisible illnesses to access educational or work opportunities. Professors and employers who were required to provide me with reasonable accommodations insisted that my requests for remote work or recorded lectures were impossible to accommodate. Yet when the COVID-19 pandemic made alternative work environments necessary for the able-bodied world, I watched in disbelief as the same accommodations which had been repeatedly dismissed as unreasonable became immediately accessible and widely dispersed. Clearly, these accommodations had been manageable all along—perhaps the true inconvenience was having to accept and validate my identity as a person with a disability. For how many others was this true? Further, how many people with chronic illnesses were forced to abandon educational or work opportunities after being denied provisions that those institutions or employers were fully capable of providing? I realized that my attempts to change the minds of misguided individuals would do little to advance my inclusion in these spaces when I was confronting a larger systemic issue. I needed to

find a way to speak not just for myself, but for my community.

Now, nearly fifteen years after my first year at Camp JAM, I fully appreciate the importance of raising JRA awareness among legislators. The language contained within existing legal protections for individuals with disabilities—allowing employers discretion to determine whether an accommodation is too burdensome to execute, for example—may allow unqualified people to make judgments on who belongs to the disabled community and what our community is owed by society. Yet I have realized that the best way to introduce legislators to issues of access and inclusion is not to resort to “special packaging” that privileges a reductive image of disability over the substance of our lives. Instead, I will serve my community by operating within the legal profession as a disability advocate. Advocacy necessitates patience, empathy, and an understanding of the complex nature of disability. Disability is not one-size-fits-all, nor is it a narrow category with visual criteria. As an advocate, I will fight to ensure that rights and protections are not formed on the assumption that the only valid or compelling depiction of disability is a visible one.