



DisABILITY

With the biggest smile spread across her face, 21-year-old Leah Bunnett crawls along the floor to her wheelchair at the Little Rascals Daycare.

With toddlers running around everywhere, the scene is hectic and terrifying for the average grownup, but to Bunnett, she can't wait to start her shifts at the daycare. The children all help clean up the toys as Bunnett crawls alongside them to make sure they put their toys away, and they do as they are told.

Bunnett has cerebral palsy, a muscle disease that affects the fine motor skills in the brain, limiting her to what she can do with her limbs. However, she doesn't look at it as a "disability" because in her family, the word "can't" doesn't exist.

Bunnett is a second-year early childhood education student at Loyalist College and has worked on and off for the last two years at Little Rascals Daycare in Belleville.

The connection that Bunnett has with the children is incredible to see. They really are attached to her and if they aren't trying to crawl up onto her lap while she's in her chair, you catch them playing with her seatbelt or the brakes on the chair.

"The one thing that made me want to work in daycare is because children look past the chair," explains Bunnett.

"They forget that it's there and they take me for who I am, not what I'm confined to."

Bunnett is able to get around the room in her chair or by getting down on the ground and crawling, which is how she gets around at home as well. She does everything that the other women who work there do from cleaning up after the toddlers, teaching them sign language, dressing and undressing them for outside playtime, feeding them and getting them ready for nap time.

She is able to do it all, just in her own unique way, which is ultimately what we all do when we are in our own workplace or natural environment.

"It was hard for me to get a job at any of the daycares in Belleville, mostly because a lot of them considered me more of a liability than an asset," Bunnett states.

"They just kept focusing on the negatives and wouldn't give me a chance to prove that I can do what everyone else can. I just get it done in a different way."

Cheryl O'Hara is one of the co-ordinators at Little Rascals and has been one of the key people helping Bunnett in her struggle for independence and equality in the workforce. O'Hara and the other co-ordinator at the daycare, Rachel Cowan, both agree with looking at a person and choosing them to work for them because of what they can gain by having these individuals work for them, which is what they did for Bunnett.

"We didn't look at the wheelchair as a disability or anything negative for that matter," O'Hara explains.

"We look at everyone and we look at what they can offer us. We have many children here at the daycare who have disabilities, and because they are so young, you can't really tell since it's not as obvious. But in adults, it's a lot more obvious and people tend to only focus on their disability. Leah has really been a great addition to our team, her energy and positivity is really felt and seen among the children."

With a strong support system of friends and family backing up Bunnett, she is almost invincible when it comes to the challenges she faces in life. She really does believe in herself personally, which makes her story that much more powerful and inspiring.



Top: "The reason I wanted to do ECE was because I knew that when working with toddlers, they would look past the chair and accept me for who I am."

Top right: Bunnett doesn't allow that to stop her from working with children.

Middle right: Bunnett plays outside with her students at Little Rascal Daycare in Belleville.

Above: "I wish that the daycare would let me handle the toddlers more, but some of the ladies really worry about me dropping them. I understand, but I've been taught how to handle them, and I normally don't have a problem at all. It always makes me feel so happy when they just crawl onto my lap."

Right: "Getting the kids to sit still can be a hassle, I'm always on their level and at times I feel like if I was able to be higher they might listen to me right away. For the most part, they are always listening to me, and I usually don't have a hard time working with them."

Story and Photographs by Kelly Gagné