

Our Community Lacks Proper Awareness for Disabilities

When it comes to disability, Milton students and faculty seem fundamentally unaware. Our lack of knowledge might not be coincidental: Milton is a private boarding school with a largely upper-class community whose privilege can induce blindness to the struggles of certain individuals. Conversely, in public schools, people develop an awareness as they pass by special education classrooms in the halls and see students who need more help than others. But an isolated background is no excuse for Milton's lack of addressing disabilities. There are two main issues upon which Milton fails to take action: inadequate school facilities for physical disabilities and a general lack of awareness among non-disabled members of the community.

Milton is old; buildings like Straus Library are practically historical sites. Straus, in keeping its old-fashioned layout, lacks an accessible entrance for wheelchair users like Iko Lee '26. Because he can walk short distances, entering the building is not an impossibility, but he feels nonetheless that "the campus wasn't built for [him]." Should people, then, continue to preserve the old traditions at the expense of current community members? Construction might require thorough paperwork and even disassembly of the entire structure, but conserving the building to commemorate past centuries past should not undermine the priorities of its current utility. Far from the historical treasure that Milton deems it, Straus is a blatant symbol of ignorance and neglect.

Even though we have newer facilities that provide accessible entrance for disabled students, no one really seems to pay attention to their upkeep. Namely, the Quad-facing doors of the Schwarz Student Center have an automatic button that never works. Lee says he brought up the issue to a member of staff, but that no one ever resolved the situation. If Milton is so adamant about keeping historical spaces the way they are, the bare minimum the school can do is invest in existing accommodations that are meant to help people with physical disabilities. We cannot simply install a button and wash our hands of the job.

An important reason why these issues go ignored is that the student body is largely uneducated about the disabled community. Such ignorance engenders harm, whether intentionally or not. "Just treat us like normal people," says Lee. He believes that, on a fundamental level, people at Milton don't know how to interact with someone who has a disability. "The biggest thing is intrusive questions. Upon seeing me, people think, 'I can ask this

question about you. I have a right to know what's going on with you.” Often, he hears these remarks from people whom he does not even know.

To spread awareness about disabilities, students and faculty need to hear from multiple voices as people's experiences can differ vastly. Last year, Jake Thibeault '22 delivered an empowering speech to the Upper School audience on his journey of recovering from a life-changing injury—his memorable and meaningful speech, wherein he articulated his “no quit” mindset, deeply resonated with the audience. However, it seems as if Milton has decided that his story is both the start and end of the conversation around disability. Thibeault's speech, on the contrary, is not the right place to stop. If Thibeault is the only individual through which students acquire knowledge about people with disabilities, his image is the only image that will come to mind when people think of a disabled person: inspiring, moving, and resilient. Such a perception, in reality, is nothing but dehumanizing.

This harmful view stems from distorted media portrayal of the disabled community. For example, an online poster might display a marathon-running amputee and a caption that reads, “If she can do it, you can too!” Disability rights activist Stella Young coined the term “inspiration porn” to state that such representations objectify disabled people's experiences into objects of inspiration. The media, in doing so, sets unrealistic standards for people with disabilities; to make people aware of the harm in portraying disabled people as inspirational saints, Milton does not have to reject stories such as Thibeault's. Rather, the school must educate students and faculty that disabled individuals do not share the same narrative.

Everything builds upon awareness. By maintaining accessible facilities and encouraging discourse and awareness, Milton can do better. Its overwhelmingly disproportionate non-disabled population, too, needs to reevaluate the root of their judgment. Such a habit — not distorted representation — is what will bring people true inspiration.