

# *Inclusion Awareness Sunday*

by Maria Bournias

On November 21, 2010, our church celebrated its first annual Inclusion Awareness Sunday. On this day, we especially welcomed those with disabilities into our parish and sought to enable their full participation in the life of our church. By observing Inclusion Awareness Sunday, our mission was to further educate parishioners to the needs of persons and children with disabilities in our midst, as well as to recognize the tremendous value they add to our community. I am very proud of our church for partaking in this beautiful ministry. I am even more proud of all our parishioners who embraced the message and purpose wholeheartedly.

The church was enveloped in a sea of white ribbons as parishioners entering the church were pinned with these symbols of unification of our community supporting the holiness and virtues of persons with disabilities. Welcome pamphlets were passed out explaining the meaning behind the day, as well as prayer cards with a special inclusion awareness prayer. We also provided copies of Father Chryssavgis's booklet, "Body of Christ," which spreads the message of inclusion and acceptance.

As the day began, I was admittedly nervous and wary as to how everything would unfold. With our first few parishioners entering church, I sensed confusion as to the purpose behind the day. I realize now that perhaps it was my own uneasiness that our early parishioners were sensing. I was afraid of the meaning being lost and that maybe our church wasn't ready for the message. I took a deep breath and with the consolation of my fellow parish council members, Lea Drivas and Xanthipi Gabriel, whom I am deeply indebted, we forged forward. Most fortunately, the day carried on beyond the success and enrichment that I was even hoping for. Parishioner after parishioner, I started hearing beautiful words of appreciation and humbleness. Many were touched that our parish was extending such a gesture. Many felt inspired that our church just felt especially beautiful on this day, proud that we were doing God's work.

As part of service, artoklasia was dedicated in reverence to persons and children with disabilities. After which, Father Christos gave a beautiful sermon as to how our community as a whole has to revisit how they view and welcome persons and children with special needs. His message was deeply moving as he related how often times the Greek community has not been tolerable and accepting of those with special needs. At the end of service, as a token of our appreciation for their participation in the life of our community, we passed out icons of the Panagia and small bibles donated by the American Bible Society to our special guests with disabilities.

The significance of Father's words resonated with me in both sadness and joy. As an adult born with a disability called spina bifida, I was blessed to also say a few words and as I stood there and told my story, I realized that perhaps what I was seeking was my own personal desire for inclusion in the parish I have grown up in my whole life. I was sad that it took me 34 years to find the courage to accept that it is ok to admit that I am not perfect, but that I still have gifts I can offer to my parish and to those I meet. I was quickly rewarded with joy when I saw many nodding their heads, many in tears and many expressing their congratulations and appreciation at the end of service. That was the feeling of inclusion I waited many

years to experience. And that is the very feeling of inclusion that every individual and child with any disability should feel every single day of their life, and most especially every single time they are within the house of God.

Everyone whose path you cross in life has a gift—a gift that God bestows on every person to enhance the lives of others. The key, however, is the ability to see that gift. Sometimes, if all we see is someone's disability or limitations, we lose sight of the value that person really has. This is honestly the ultimate missed opportunity of enrichment. However, the skills needed to find these gifts in others is simple—open your heart, open your mind and open your door.

The reality is that we all have challenges and we all have abilities. Even if right now your limitations are none, one day somehow, you or a loved one may experience one of life's hurdles. And if that time comes, the message should be clear. God will love you still. Your church community will support you unrelentingly. We should all find comfort knowing that all challenges are best fought unified.

Several years before my mother passed away, she became uncomfortable coming to church because she couldn't wear "good" shoes as it became difficult to walk. Similarly, my grandfather was often anxious about attending church, embarrassed if he couldn't stand throughout the whole service. This is the exact opposite of how they should feel. Rather than hesitating about what others may think or say, they should have found solace that church was a place of refuge where they felt acceptance and inclusion by both the church under God and our community while in God's house. If there is any greater message to spread to any of our loved ones who experience the same anxiety, it is to encourage them to come to church! Remind them that both our parish and our community welcomes them, especially when they seek the help and love of God most.

When we are welcoming to all of God's children, we are in effect doing the ultimate deed of God's wishes. We are spreading the love that God wishes for all his children. Perhaps, there is no more true act of kindness than the act of inclusion. When we accept each other for who we are without prejudices or without stereotypes, we open our hearts to others and fill it to the brim with God's admiration of us. I challenge everyone to not let the inspiration of Inclusion Awareness Sunday end with that day. I encourage everyone to live the message everyday. You will see, it is hardly just about enriching the lives of persons and children with disabilities. Rather, it is about enriching your very own life.

I offer a genuine bout of gratitude to Father Christos for his earnest support and continual encouragement in bringing this day to fruition. I also offer my sincere appreciation to all of the Parish Council for embracing this event with open arms from the very first day it was introduced. Many thanks to the Ladies of Philoptochos, GOYA and the Sunday School for their enthusiastic participation! Finally, I am deeply indebted to the Pathways Foundation ([www.InclusionInWorship.org](http://www.InclusionInWorship.org)) who created this ministry which we were all blessed to have experienced, as well as to Constantine Zografopoulos ([www.kostas.org](http://www.kostas.org)) who apprised me of this blessed day as he was the light behind my inspiration from day one.

I earnestly look forward to our next year's celebration! I wish all happy and healthy holidays! Let the good feelings of acceptance and love continue to carry you!