

On Target: T-Shirt Model Generates Hope for a World that Includes People with Intellectual Disabilities

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A young boy who happens to have Down syndrome was part of a Target ad for t-shirts and pants earlier this month. So what's the big deal?

He was not in a back section of the flyer for "Specially Abled" kids.

He was not in a "disability catalogue" with a title like "Exceptional Clothes for Exceptional Children."

He was not included in a special feature to celebrate "Down syndrome week."

In fact, there's nothing "special" about the ad at all. He's just doing what all the other models in the flyer are doing: helping Target with the selling of clothes.

If you aren't getting this, that's OK. Only a small percentage of citizens are aware that people with intellectual disabilities are one of the most systemically segregated populations in Canadian society (and elsewhere). Although shifts are underway, for the most part their education, housing, vocational, and recreational experiences are segregated – people with intellectual disabilities learn, live, work, and play separate from others. That's what "Special Education" is all about. That's what group homes, sheltered workshops, day programs, and "special needs recreation" are all about.

I'm not ignoring the need for acute care for some people with certain physical and mental health problems, or doubting the ability of institutional settings to deliver those resources. I'm talking about the vast majority of individuals with intellectual disabilities who are spending their time in segregated environments because either no other options have been presented to them, and/or they cannot access the support they need to live their lives in community settings.

Things are starting to change, but these are massive and complicated systems, and direct and indirect resistance is strong. This is not without reason. There are legitimate fears that resources – once stripped away from segregated activities – will simply vanish. Welcoming and including people with intellectual disabilities in our community requires a variety of critical supports. It's hard work.

I'm generalizing here, but with a high degree of accuracy I have a pretty good idea what most people with intellectual disabilities are after in life: they want a home of their own – to start out in a tiny little apartment just like so many of us did – to have their own dishtowels and a bottle of squeeze ketchup in the fridge. They want a real paying job. They want real friends – not just paid people catering to their "needs." [They want to love. And to be loved.](#)

And so, I am overly jubilant about this young boy's appearance in the weekly Target ad. Because it gives me hope. If he can just be a kid helping sell a t-shirt, then maybe he can just be a kid in a real high school classroom. He'll pursue his love of track and field with other local athletes where he'll consistently finish 7th out of a field of 12 and no one will give him a "participation medal." They will however invite him out for chicken wings. He'll eat too many. None of his friends will lecture him about his dietary habits. His nickname will be "Bond" in honour of his 007 finishes. He will retort with a rude limerick that brings the house down.

Bond will go on to be a student in a college classroom, during which time he will support himself with a part-time job at local restaurant, where he will also meet his first serious girlfriend. They will take a bus to a distant city to see the Lady Gaga comeback tour. Their friends will mock them on Facebook for idolizing the music of their parents. Bond will propose to his girlfriend at sunrise the next day, and they'll settle into a nice little affordable apartment, where they will befriend their much older neighbour, who will the very next winter slip on some ice. Bond will call 911 and save his neighbour's life. A few years later the neighbour will drive Bond's wife to the hospital when she goes into labour two weeks early. There will be heartbreak. There will be celebrations. And on his life will go.

That's a nice story. I made it up. But it's one that is actually being written daily. There are individuals with intellectual disabilities in your own community – wherever you may be – that are living a Rosa Parks existence through their efforts to enjoy a routine existence (not "special") as students, employees, neighbours, and friends. Their struggle is real.

Would you like to help change this?

You can do what Target has done by NOT doing anything SPECIAL and NOT supporting approaches that separate people with disabilities from others. Make it REAL.

Be a neighbour. Be a co-worker. Be an acquaintance. I can't guarantee friendship, because that takes two and it doesn't always happen. But friendly, you can be. Sure, you might have to be a bit deliberate about it. You might even require some help finding ways to get involved. I'll be happy to help if I can – with anything from connecting with a person who shares your interests (could be music, a hobby, a sport, other) to thinking about how your workplace could diversify their hiring practices to include people with intellectual disabilities. Further reading: see "Target Is 'Down' With Down Syndrome: 5 Things Target Said By Saying Nothing At All" on the blog [Noah's Dad](#) – to the best of my knowledge, this blog was responsible for much of the word of mouth about this story.