



Chain Reaction

By Valeria Olaya Valdiviezo

I thought I was going to volunteer for a year and I ended up volunteering my entire life. Nowadays I am on my way to become a doctor.

When I knocked at the door of Forest View Ave 29 for first time I was so nervous, I was just about to meet the people I was going to work with for the next year. A black beautiful woman opened the door, she smiled and said “Valeria come in”. I thought well, she looks pretty “normal”. I was supposed to support ICYE UK working with disabled people so didn’t really know what to expect. Of course I couldn’t understand her British accent so after a while I realised she was actually my boss.

Later on I met Louise a woman with learning disabilities and Jackie an autistic lady. I thought I had a lot to teach them, but it turned out that I learned a lot more from them. Louise and Jackie showed me a completely different world. When you are out with a person who suddenly starts acting differently, people stare at you, some look away after a while, some others stay witnessing the behaviour and judge, yes! People judge when they don’t understand what’s happening. At the beginning it was hard to bear the looks, later I didn’t even notice them.

Louise and Jackie gave me the chance to understand their world. The way they see things it’s just amazing. I learned to see with their eyes, to feel and to live as they do. Many people feel sorry for disabled people without even imagining that the way they live their life is so pure and full of joy. I used to get nervous when I saw a disabled person, I didn’t know whether to look, if I would bother because I did it or because I ignored their presence. When I was out with my ladies I realized many people are in the same situation I was before. Today I no longer see a wheelchair, a deaf or a mentally ill person, I only see people.

I’ve been granted this gift, now it is my obligation and commitment to spread the knowledge and teach the world to see the disabled community as equals, as they are, people. After my volunteering, back home I decided to study medicine. There are so many ways to help people but I think as a doctor more people can be reached. More than once I’ve asked myself if this is what I want to dedicate myself for the rest of my life but the fact is that Louise and Jackie didn’t give me the right to fail.

Medicine means the perfect opportunity to unify society, disabled people don’t have to be excluded, they deserve to be heard, understood and cared for. For those to whom medicine cannot give more answers, doctors are obliged to give them quality of life until their last breath. A smile is the most honest soul response and the most gratifying reaction, I still remember Louise and Jackie’s smiles, those smiles are the ones that continue to motivate me to volunteer for the rest of my life.