

Erica Kramer, Kingston Starbucks (Former DSP with Christian Horizons)

The following message was shared by Erica after she accepted her Excellence in Action award at the East District Annual Community Meeting. We are inspired by powerful stories of belonging like this one – stories shared at our ACMs and beyond. Erica's speech has been edited for clarity and length.

I want to start by saying, "Thank you." I recognize a lot of faces from when I used to be a DSP here, and I'm thankful for your hospitality and for the recognition. I was excited when I found out I would be receiving this award. I love any opportunity to speak to people about something that makes me so passionate. People are my passion, and any chance I have to talk about the impact they've been able to make on my life feels like such a gift.

The struggle is how to say in a few words what an impact people have had on you. I can use the most beautiful words to teach about inclusivity, to try to illustrate to people why inclusion is a benefit to all of us, but it will always pale in comparison to people's ability to show that by just being close and being present with someone.

The mission statement of Starbucks is, "To inspire and nurture the human spirit - one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time." The more time I spent there, the more I realized that we were missing out on a group of people that could really help us deliver this mission statement. I spoke with my district manager, and he gave me the green light to hire a first "café attendant," a role that was designed for people with developmental disabilities where they would be taking on a portion of the responsibilities. An opportunity came up, so we brought on a man named Ethan.

Then one day, a man named John came in and saw Ethan working here, and his mom approached us about John working there too, because John also had Down Syndrome. John was next to join our team. But we didn't stop there.

When Ethan was first hired, another employee came up to me and asked if he would get special training because he'd never worked with someone with disabilities. Fast forward to Ethan's training day, and the two of them were making a latte together. They made some obscure reference to anime that they were able to relate to the coffee, and you could just hear them laughing in the cafe. In that moment Ethan taught him that someone may be different than you, but that doesn't mean that you won't find something in common with them if you try. Give people a chance.

I remember Lindsay, whose job started out as mostly cleaning and making some coffee. One day another employee pulled her aside and said that he thought she could do more. He then taught her how to use the hot bar. In that moment, she blew them away by how quickly she was able to pick it up. Lindsay solidified the saying, “Don't judge a book by its cover” in that person's mind that day.

I have a million other stories that I could share, but there's one more that stands out.

A few weeks ago, I was chatting with my district manager again – the same guy that I'd advocated to about how we need to have inclusive hiring practices. He said to me, “Erica, why do we call them ‘Café Attendants’? They're employees just like anybody else. Can we just call them baristas?” That's teaching, and that's growth. I went from advocating to him, to him advocating to me because he had seen it for himself.

That's what I've been trying to teach my whole life, and I'll say it again: My ability to explain will never compare to the impact that someone else has just by being present in the community. The most important thing that I can do is be a hinge behind the scenes, helping to open doors for people that maybe the world has already shut to them. They will do a lot of the other work themselves. Everybody needs to be given the space, the opportunity, and the chance. When we isolate people or don't work for inclusivity, we miss out on what I believe is a fundamental part of life's beautiful design.

How will you be a hinge? What door can you help to open?
Because the impact it will have will be incredible.

The Starbucks Erica works at now has five hires with developmental disabilities with another person currently going through the hiring process.

Making the Connection

- How have you seen people be a “hinge” in this way, opening doors for people who might have doors shut to them otherwise? How might you, or how have you, worked to be a “hinge” yourself?
- Did you have a chance to get out to an ACM gathering this year? What story or moment stood out to you?