

**44th National Essay Contest on Human Rights
for Junior High School Students
Prime Minister's Award**

What Begins with Understanding

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My mother is hearing-impaired. She had already lost her hearing when I was born, so it was not anything special for me that my mother could not hear. Therefore, having a hearing-impaired mother has been a normal part of life for me.

My mother gradually developed hearing loss with no known cause and completely lost her hearing by her early 20s. She lost her hearing after growing up and had no one who could communicate in sign language around her. Therefore, it seems that she learned to read lips—a method called "lip-reading"—to understand what people say by watching the movement of their mouths.

My mother is always cheerful and energetic and never seems to worry about her disability. After coming home from school, telling my mother about my day is my daily routine and my pleasure. Although she cannot hear, she watches the movement of my mouth and listens to me earnestly. No matter what troubles or hardships I face, talking about them with my mother makes my heart feel lighter. For me, my mother is my best emotional support.

When I was in the sixth grade, my fifth-grade homeroom teacher asked if my mother could give a talk in a welfare class, but she did not agree right away. She worried, "Yume might feel embarrassed at school because everyone would find out I could not hear." But I would actually be happy to see my beloved mother talk in front of everyone! So I gave my hesitant mother a push by saying, "The children in the fifth grade are all kind and nice. You don't need to worry!"

Accepting the request, my mother put her experience down in writing. Reading her writing, I was profoundly shocked. It revealed how much my mother had suffered and struggled in her journey to becoming the always cheerful and energetic mother she is now.

As the cause of her hearing loss was unknown, she visited many hospitals trying desperately to find a cure. She was devastated when all the doctors she visited said there was no cure. Some people changed their behavior and looked down on her when she told them that she was hearing-impaired. Yet even then, there have also been many people who understand her disability and help her out. In this way, my mother faced various twists and turns and struggles until becoming a cheerful and energetic mother. And she wrote the following for the end of the talk.

"I received a letter from the homeroom teacher, asking me to talk about my experience in front of you. The letter contained the teacher's wish for you: 'To grow to be a kind and strong-hearted child who can offer a hand to anyone who needs help.' However, I think it takes a lot of courage to actually give a hand to someone else. To tell the truth, it also takes courage for me, a person with a disability, to voice my need for help to those around me. Because I wonder whether I am causing inconvenience or a burden to them. But I don't think that having a disability is anything special. How about beginning with reaching out to someone closest to you? I think it would be wonderful if we could all think about whether our family members or friends are in trouble or whether there is anything we could do for them, as a natural part of our everyday lives. Then, you may become able to approach people with disabilities by putting yourself in their shoes and asking, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

For me, it is just a part of everyday life that my mother is hearing-impaired. But if I were to say to someone with no knowledge of disabilities, "I am hearing-impaired, but..." it would be difficult for them to respond immediately. One reason my mother cannot bring herself to ask people around her for help might be that she sometimes senses their bewilderment or disdain.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the prolonged use of masks made life quite inconvenient for my mother, who relies on lip-reading. However, recently, when my mother tells people that she cannot hear, more and more people have been taking off their masks to show their mouth movements or bringing out paper and a pen to communicate in writing. When I asked my mother, "I wonder why," she said, "It may be the influence of a TV drama." Come to think of it, a drama featuring hearing impairment was a hit a short time ago. Many people have come to understand how to respond to hearing-impaired people and actually put that understanding into practice. Thinking about it that way, if people have appropriate knowledge and understanding of those with disabilities,

society might become much easier to live in. Schools provide welfare experience classes, but they usually cover only a tiny fraction of the many disabilities, and I think there is still far too little time to enable us to truly understand.

Just as I came to see my mother's disability as nothing special, I hope that, by gaining a deeper understanding of the various kinds of disabilities, society will evolve to see people for who they are, without the concept of disabled people.

Rather than the framework of *able-bodied people helping disabled people*, isn't the idea of *people helping people* what truly matters?