George Mason Panhellenic Council seems exclusive to students with disabilities

Student not offered a bid during sorority recruitment because of her disability?

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I am not a Panhellenic woman. I am not a sister of a sorority, I am not a part of the Greek community at my university. However, I am a part of several non-Greek organizations and I am certain, that no matter what you are going through, or what disabilities you have, you have just as much of a chance of joining an organization here, as anyone else in the community.

AnnCatherine Heigl, a sophomore, division one cheerleader at George Mason University, was released from recruitment before bids were given out, meaning no sorority wanted to accept her. AnnCatherine has Downs Syndrome, and she is a student within a program called MasonLIFE, which is a post-secondary program for students with learning disabilities, according to the GMU website.

There were 288 women that went through recruitment, according to AnnCatherine’s sister, Lillie Heigl on twitter. Out of 288 women, I find it hard to believe that not one chapter offered her a spot within their organization. Sororities all around the U.S. really emphasize how inclusive they are, and how they want to promote inclusiveness. I have always had the thought in my head that every woman that could go through recruitment can find a place they love and will belong. Hearing about AnnCatherine’s story really made me see how insensitive and heartless people can be.

The GMU Panhellenic Council released a statement after Lillie Heigl’s on twitter. The main point they wanted to address was that the PHC was not responsible for what the chapters do, or who they offer bids to during recruitment. They speak of valuing inclusiveness and diversity more than once as well, and they recognize that their members have harmed others. They state that they want to make sure they continue a conversation with the members so that they can ‘do better’ than this past time.

I cannot help but think these chapters didn’t choose AnnCatherine because of her disability. On her sister’s twitter post, she explains how loved AnnCatherine is within their community, and that she has qualities that cannot be mirrored by anyone else. Lillie emphasized that AnnCatherine is the first collegiate cheerleader in the nation with an intellectual disability, and that her being accepted into MasonLIFE is a prestigious honor and should be noted. Not having AnnCatherine seems like a loss to any of these chapters at GMU.

In a society like ours, people with learning disabilities tend to be looked over in general. They are seen as different, or even sometimes less important. There are people who have the audacity to mock and make fun of them. Downs syndrome especially, is a disability we see all over social media and hear about from just small talk with people around us.

There are many videos surfacing of high schoolers with downs syndrome being asked to homecoming dances and proms and things of that nature. People comment on them saying ‘this is so sweet and generous’ or ‘they are so lucky.’ The fact of the matter is, they should not be posted for likes or attention, they should be posted because it is a fun and sweet experience to be asked to a school dance, and not just because they have a learning disability.

AnnCatherine spoke with The Mighty about why she wanted to join a sorority and go through recruitment. She said she wanted to meet new people and was very upset when she realized that she cannot join one. Her sister Lillie is a Panhellenic woman, and she encouraged her to go through recruitment.

The inclusiveness of people with learning disabilities has always been an issue within our society. Like I mentioned before, we are starting to see more recognition of them and that is certainly a step in the right direction. I do not think that the reason for Lillie Heigl’s post on twitter was to embarrass or expose GMU PHC, I think she was using her voice as well as AnnCatherine’s to bring to light the issue of exclusion and discrimination of people with learning disabilities.

People with downs often have a figurative saying attached to them. That saying is, ‘the lucky few.’ Anyone within PHC at GMU would be very lucky to have AnnCatherine a part of their organization. Many people, as myself would agree. I am hopeful, as a friend, to many people with learning disabilities, that our society will see how amazingly lucky we are to have people like them in our lives. I hope AnnCatherine’s story reaches other universities, in order to start that conversation and make changes for the good of their students.