



## The Dating Life

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by Eileen

*Eileen is a high school senior in San Diego, California. She plans to attend college at California State University San Marcos in Fall, 2002. She will be majoring in Liberal Studies and working towards her teaching credential in elementary education. She enjoys playing wheelchair rugby, basketball, and soccer. She also enjoys handcycling, reading, and writing.*

I am a seventeen year old high school senior living in southern California. I am also a T10 paraplegic since the age of 10. While there have been some negative experiences that include myself and my chair, there have been many more positive experiences.

If I had to say that there is one most difficult thing about being a teen in a wheelchair, it would be that I still feel there is a constant battle to "belong." By belong, I mean to feel that I am a part of my community, my school, to have a feeling of being welcome, and to never ever again feel the need to question my own self value, worth, or ability. As a teen, this is one of the most complicated and painful parts of being in a wheelchair.

Like it or not, it is a fact of life that some people out in the real world have their own preconceived notions about my capabilities. Without beginning to know my abilities, they have already made up their minds about my "disabilities." I used quotation marks around the word "disability" because I don't consider myself to be disabled. I believe that no matter what physical or mental challenge a person faces, that every single person is able in some way or form. Okay, I don't walk, but I cover miles each day rolling. I can tell you that when I go shopping at the mall with my friends, they complain about being tired long before I feel tired. Does that make me more able than them? Perhaps it's arrogant on my part, but I'd sure like to think so!

Dating and social opportunities can be painful and challenging in their own ways. I have found that it is hard to convince my peers that I'm ready, willing, and able to date, go to beach parties, and whatever normal day to day social functions they go to. A lot of my friends get together in groups and go to the movies, go shopping, go over to each others house, watch videos and hang out. Even as a senior in high school, it hasn't become less of a battle to be included with my friends. The challenge with the surrounding adults is definitely unparalleled. Most parents seem to be overly concerned about picking my chair up and taking me with their kids to the mall, a movie, or whatever. I can't tell you how many times my peers have said to me, "You're more than welcome to come, but you'll have to find your own way. We don't have room for you and your chair." Luckily, I have very cooperative parents who, most of the time, don't mind taking me places.

It's important to remember that only by making yourself a part of peers will you have the ability to change their minds and alleviate their fears about your inclusion. If you back away from going to parties, movies, dates, and other social occasions because you don't feel as though you fit in, you only reinforce their preconceived notions. We have to learn to make our way in the world. Ready or not....it's ready for us! We do belong. We can contribute. I welcome your questions and concerns about teen dating and your experiences. I have a strong support network of friends both able-bodied and "disabled" that I can get information from in the event that I cannot relate to your question or experience personally. I look forward to hearing from you all soon.



Do you have something to share with us about your Dating experiences? How do you feel in school? Maybe you have some strategies to share with others? If so, we welcome your input. Please send your stories to [info@fvkasa.org](mailto:info@fvkasa.org). Be sure to include your name, address, phone number and email address and a few sentences about you.