PHOTO ESSAY

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For the past year, I have been working on a photo documentary project on six women who live in a group home in Iowa City. These women have various developmental and physical disabilities ranging from Down's syndrome, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, seizure disorder, hydrocephalus, and Alzheimer's disease.

Before I left Malaysia to study abroad in the United States, I did not have much exposure to people with disabilities. My knowledge of them was limited to brief encounters with the disabled who were begging on the street, selling lotteries in the marketplace or wandering aimlessly in town. Usually they were dressed in rags with disheveled hair, sitting by the corners, and waiting for those passing by to toss them a dime or two. For the most part, Malaysians with disabilities are stigmatized and shunned, feared and ignored. They are incarcerated in poorly staffed and overcrowded mental institutions, or hidden in homes. Often, they earn meager salaries selling handicrafts or are left deserted in the streets.

In the United States, however, I was surprised to see a seemingly large number of people living with disabilities who were on their way to work, running errands, meeting friends, or just enjoying the afternoon along Iowa City's pedestrian mall. This project is an attempt to look further into the surprise of what I was seeing.

The common portrayals of those with disabilities is that the deformity of body often symbolizes the deformity of soul; disabled people are angry and bitter at their fate and so forth, causing stigmas, fears and prejudices in society. But this is not what I've learnt from the women who have generously opened their lives to me. They showed me how they go on and appreciate lives in spite of their colossal challenges. They taught me how each of us shared more similarities than differences, how we are all "disabled" in our own ways. And they taught me perhaps the greatest disability we can have lies in our attitude, prejudice and treatment of others.

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