



JOSEPHINE JAMES

by Nancy Evans

Department of Counseling and Rehabilitation Education

Josephine (Josie) James is a new TA who has been assigned a lab section of Physical Geography. Josie is very excited about this opportunity since she has always wanted to be a university instructor, and she has lots of ideas for making physical geography exciting and relevant for her students. Josie has spent the summer prior to beginning graduate school working on her class. She firmly believes that hands-on learning is the only way to make the concepts of physical geography real to beginning level students. As a result most of her class sessions involve active participation and work with maps. She has units in which students create their own maps, illustrating the distribution of natural resources, areas of environmental mismanagement, etc. Josie has also planned a number of field trips so students can observe first-hand the effects of environmental pollution, forestry management practices, and other issues related to the environment. Many of these field trips involve a significant amount of hiking in rather rough terrain, but Josie figures that undergraduates will enjoy the challenge and the change from sitting in a classroom every period, and that they will learn more actually interacting with and experiencing the environment than they ever would just listening to lectures and reading about these issues.

Josie approaches her first class with a bit of apprehension, but mostly with excitement. She is eager to get to know her students and to share her excitement for physical geography with them. She gets to class early and greets the students as they enter the room. Close to the starting time of class, a young woman enters the class who obviously has trouble walking. She uses crutches and has braces on both legs. It takes her some time to enter the classroom and take a seat. Once she is seated, Josie also sees that the young woman has limited use of her hands. She has brought a tape recorder to record the class because she cannot hold a pencil to write. She asks Josie if this is acceptable to her and Josie says she has no objections.

Josie distributes a syllabus to the class which outlines the activities and assignments she has planned. As she begins to go over the syllabus, she notices that this young woman is getting more and more distressed. Josie realizes that many of the activities that she has planned will be impossible for this student. She also notices that other students in the class keep glancing at this young woman and that a few side comments are shared between students sitting in the back of the room. Josie is very uncomfortable with the entire situation but chooses to ignore it since she doesn't want to call attention to the young woman. She finishes the review of her syllabus as quickly as possible and asks in a perfunctory way if anyone has any questions. Since no one does, she gives the assignment for the next week and lets the class go early. She wants to talk to the young disabled woman, but doesn't know what to say.

The young woman, whose name she finds out is Lisa Maxwell, waits until all the other students have left and then approaches Josie. She asks Josie if she received a notice from Disabled Student Services informing her that Lisa would be in her class and that Lisa had cerebral palsy. Josie tells Lisa that she didn't get the note and perhaps it had gone to the professor in charge of the class. Josie apologizes to Lisa for the mix-up. Lisa tells Josie that she plans to drop the class

since it is evident that she cannot do the required work. Josie is flustered but tells Lisa that might be best. Josie can see that Lisa is close to tears, and she again apologizes for the uncomfortable situation. Lisa makes her way out of the classroom. Josie feels terrible but doesn't know how else she could have handled the situation.

Questions

1. What could Josie have done to better handle this situation?
2. Should Josie have anticipated that she might have a disabled student in her class and taken this into account in planning her syllabus?
3. Should Josie have adjusted her syllabus to accommodate Lisa? Would such an adjustment have been fair to Lisa? To the other students in the class?
4. Should Josie have handled the class differently? For instance, should she have asked the students engaged in the side conversation to stop? Should she have asked Lisa to express her concerns in the class?
5. How might Josie have handled her post-class discussion with Lisa more effectively?
6. Is dropping the class the best solution for Lisa?