

“People ask if I want to be called ‘handicapped’ or ‘disabled.’ I always reply,

Just Call Me
Geri

Geri Mariano
Inspirational Speaker



Then I share stories of the many physical, emotional and social situations I have faced and overcome. For over ten years I have spoken to adults and children of all ages, offering insights and sharing observations about compassion, challenges, and creativity.”

about

Geri speaks about diversity, disability, and empowerment for “differently abled” people. Geri was “left behind” at the hospital by her biological parents during an era when abandonment was common for people with disabilities. Geri lives with a form of dwarfism that causes shortened limbs and other skeletal deformities. Geri remained at White Plains Hospital until she was 3 months old. She was later transferred to Valhalla’s Blythedale Children’s Hospital where she remained for a while longer. However, Westchester Department of Social Services changed her fate. Caseworkers advocated for Geri to live a fuller life. After placing an adoption ad in a local newspaper, a loving family was found. William and Doris Mariano, and their three daughters, were chosen as Geri’s family. By the time Geri was ready to enroll in school (spring of 1972), mandates for special needs education in public schools were still in the formative stage. Several school districts said “No,” but Byram Hills CSD in Armonk, NY welcomed Geri. They guaranteed her right to a great education.

After graduating high school, Geri attended Smith College in Northampton, MA. Quickly realizing that the college campus needed accessibility improvements, Geri spent the next four years studying and advocating for special needs students. During this time, she began speaking out. She sat on the first College Committee for Special Needs. She organized and participated in many awareness activities and events. Geri graduated in 1989 with a BA in American Studies. Because of her advocacy, this was the college’s first commencement ceremony that all students walked up a ramp to accept their diplomas.

After graduation, Geri faced employment and housing discrimination. Lacking a driver’s license and needing special accommodations to access buildings, she was unable to “crash” with friends while job hunting. Slowly her confidence began to erode. She was no longer the brave girl who used to shake her mother’s hand loose to cross the busy New York City streets. She no longer trusted herself to make decisions.

Surprisingly, while recovering from hip replacement surgery, Geri regained her confidence. She found a new passion in recreational therapy. Despite a long healing road, she earned a Masters degree in 2007 in Therapeutic Recreation and graduated with a 4.0 GPA from Lehman College in the Bronx. But only three years later, Geri needed a second hip replacement. Her hard earned independence was lost. She kept speaking to groups during her recovery. She draws strength from sharing her stories. Today, Geri continues to address varied audiences around the country, sharing her life themes of Compassion, Challenges, Creativity, and Common Sense.

kind honest
strong
humorous



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inspirational
engaging
independent

workshops & topics

Geri conducts age-appropriate presentations for all audiences ranging from nursery school through college and graduate-level classes. Her presentations are suited to students in the classroom, student clubs, faith-based and community groups, and business and professional organizations.

Keynotes and presentations can be customized to specific audience needs. Geri encourages the participants to prepare questions prior to and during a presentation.

PRESENTATION TOPICS

DIVERSITY - DISABILITIES: Motivational stories to inspire everyone to overcome challenges. We are all differently abled in many ways. We are also the same in many ways.

EMPOWERMENT: How to become stronger when facing discrimination, claim one's rights, focus on talents and abilities.

SENSITIVITY TRAINING: Sensitizing audiences about attitudes and behaviors that may unwittingly cause offense and harm.

BULLYING: Sharing personal experiences and tools for students to shut down bullying by others.

TRAVEL AND RECREATION: Discussing challenges while maneuvering in a world of amenities that are often obstacles instead.

DISABLED VETERANS: Understanding returning soldiers and how their lives were changed after sustaining injuries. Our heroes deserve support and assistance.

AUDIENCES:

- Nursery School ages 3-4 years
- Kindergarten ages 4-6 years
- Elementary Schools - 1st through 5th Grades
- Middle Schools - 6th through 8th Grades
- High School including Electives
- University undergraduate; Graduate courses
- Business, Professional, Community and Faith-based groups



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testimonials

Michael C. Plias, Principal, Thelma L. Sandmeier Elementary School, Springfield, NJ

All of the staff and students had a memorable experience during your program due to your approach to capture acts of kindness, respect, and most importantly, the willingness to thrive through obstacles (trials and tribulations). These types of programs are so meaningful and valuable, which will hopefully have lasting effects on our students. You are an inspiration to all of us and have the "it" factor to take your program to the next level!

Mark Bodwell, Principal, West Bridgewater Public School/Howard School, West Bridgewater, MA

As an educator I was impressed to see the wonderful presence she displayed with the students. Her message was engaging and she had their attention from the moment they walked into the room. She touched on topics related to diversity, discrimination and bullying. I feel that that students and teachers came out of her talk more informed and inspired to celebrate differences.

Nancy Tuck, LMSW and Limor Tintweiss, MA, Lawrence Woodmere Academy, Woodmere, NY

When Geri walks into a room, as she did the day she came to the Lawrence Woodmere Academy to address an assembly of students, there is a visceral, palpable sensation that is nothing short of transcendence. Greatness cannot be described. It can only be experienced. How many people can walk into a room of middle school students and even begin to secure their undivided attention? Embracing them with such character and presence, that, when told they have to break for lunch, they are reluctant to pry themselves apart from Geri's warm, emotional hold? But answer for it she does. With poise, elegance, humanity, and beauty, Geri Mariano answers.

Connie Keating, 3rd Grade Teacher, Rose L. MacDonald School, West Bridgewater, MA

Geri has a wonderful gift for putting her audience at ease and discussing every aspect of her situation in a way that is sometimes poignant, often humorous, and always unfailingly honest...Ms. Mariano is very thorough in her presentation, providing preparatory material in advance of her visit, allotting plenty of time for discussion as well as question and answer.

Allison Cook Swiatowicz, 6th Grade Teacher, Mildred E. Strang MS, Yorktown, NY

Every time Geri Mariano presents to our students, there is a different take away. Kindness, Acceptance, Strength, Independence. Thank you for promoting togetherness on Unity Day!

M., Wampus Elementary School (Grade 5), Armonk, NY

I think you are an AMAZING role model and great person! It was good for our class to meet someone who is not the same on the outside but has the same (if not bigger) heart than everyone else.

Saleena Gee, Grade 4 Parent, West Springfield, NJ

Thank you so very much for visiting Springfield. Our children had so many wonderful compliments for your presentation today! The FIRST thing my 4th grader said to me when I picked him up (hours later) was, "Mom! I have to tell you about our assembly today!"

Gina Serio, Grade 4 Parent, Caldwell, NY

My daughter, a fourth grader at Caldwell, walked in the door talking about you. She said she really enjoyed hearing you speak today. Thank you for coming in to speak to the students. I am glad our PTAs are able to find and provide such great programs for our children.

Alana Director Pero, Grade 5 Parent, Armonk, NY

My son wrote the most touching letter from his heart last night that left me knowing how much of an impact you have left on these children. Thank you!

Honorable Thomas M. Roach, Mayor, City of White Plains, NY

Geri provided a straight forward, real world perspective on what it is like to live with physical challenges to the after school program children at our elementary schools. I believe the experience of meeting and talking with Geri is one that will have a lasting impact on these children. It will stay with them and hopefully influence the way they interact with all people so that they understand that every person deserves to be treated with respect.

Nicole Buckley, Pennsylvania-State Director, St. John's Community Services, PA

It was an absolute pleasure to hear Geri share her motivating story. Geri connected with the audience and demonstrated that we all have abilities and, a place in the community. She taught everyone the value of relationships, and how with the right supports our futures are bright. Geri values Employment First, Community Integration and sharing her advocacy voice. She is a woman who is a true inspiration to everyone living with a disability. Her compassion, warmth, patience and humor serve her well in sharing her unyielding conviction to educate others.

press & media

Here are some excerpts from the media coverage that Geri has received:

Chappaqua-MountKiscoPatch

"Mariano described her early school years as one of acceptance from her peers, noting that even though she could not physically play jump rope due to the need to wear prosthetic legs to compensate for impairment in her legs, she was still able to hold the rope. She also noted to the class that if you can do something, even if you can't fully do it, what matters is that you are having fun."

- *Chappaqua-Mount Kisco Patch*

Enterprise

"I was always willing to try new things, especially as a kid," said Mariano. "I was fearless."

- *Enterprise*

Examiner

"Geri Mariano has never backed down from a challenge"

- *Examiner*

TIMES HERALD-RECORD

SERVING
THE CATSKILLS
AND HUDSON VALLEY

"She encourages students to stand up to bullies as a classmate once did for her."

- *Times Herald-Record*



White Plains High School Orange

"What defined Mariano was that she never allowed others to tell her that she was not "normal;" she never allowed others to limit her."

- *White Plains High School Orange*

Visit Geri's website to read more: press.justcallmegeri.com

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contact

Contact Geri about a speaking engagement.

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Keep in touch with Geri:



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