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Keywords

Robert Latimer,
Tracy Latimer,
euthanasia,
Holocaust,
mercy killing,

What Kind of Life Did Tracy Have?

Ashif Jaffer is a student who has just finished his first course in the Department of Disability Studies at Ryerson. He has applied for full time classes in Politics for September.

Ashif Jaffer wrote the following piece in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an undergraduate course at Ryerson University, Writing For Disability Activism. Ashif is the first student with Down's Syndrome to complete an undergraduate course within a degree program at Ryerson. While his piece is not a typical review, it was written in response to the media coverage of Robert Latimer throughout 2008. During that period, Latimer came before the National Parole Board after serving 10 years of his life sentence for the 1993 murder of his disabled daughter, Tracy. Upon appeal he was granted day parole, a transfer to a half-way house in British Columbia and unescorted leave over the Christmas and New Year's holidays.

Writing for Disability Activism was developed and is taught by Tory Bowman. In completing this assignment, Ashif and his fellow students were asked to follow the opinion/editorial pages of a local newspaper. They were to identify and track the coverage of an issue of interest that related to the portrayal of disability in the media.

Next, students were to write a 600- to 800-word opinion piece or editorial on this issue relating to the portrayal or understanding of disability in media. Their written work was expected to demonstrate expertise in subject (through research and/or experience). Students were required to take a clear stand and establish a personal presence in their writing. Ultimately the opinion/editorial piece would offer a new way of thinking about an issue, redressing its portrayal in the media.

While opinions about Robert Latimer's actions and right to parole may vary widely. Ashif's perspective is one that is largely absent from public discourse. His words are an indictment of Latimer's actions and a call to imagine difference, disadvantage and disability in new ways.

I wonder if Tracy Latimer was ever looked at as a person by her family? In my opinion, she wasn't because she had a disability. She wasn't really a person to her family. She was a disability and a burden. While the rest of the family went to church, Robert William Latimer decided to kill his daughter Tracy. He put her in his truck and grabbed a hose and used exhaust to suffocate her with carbon monoxide. He watched her die while sitting on one of the tires of his truck. I think that he is a deadbeat father because no decent father kills his own daughter because she has a disability.

There is a comparison between Robert Latimer's actions and the actions of a father who shot his son while he was sleeping because his son was mentally ill. This story was found in the German newspaper, *Frankfurter Zeitung*, in 1937. German society supported the father and he was found not guilty. This case led to laws being passed to commit murder of people with disabilities living in Germany. Disabled people were gassed to death in the gas chambers. There was a Holocaust of the disabled before the Holocaust of Jewish people. This shows the ignorance of people in society who murdered the disabled because they thought that they were less and not equal to their standards of normal people. The Nazis planned to kill people and call it mercy killings. It was mass murderer. Their actions were not justifiable. They were heinous and evil. There is no difference between the Nazis killing people with disabilities and calling it mercy killing and Robert Latimer saying he had to kill his daughter because he couldn't bear her suffering from her disability.

What about Tracy? She never had the opportunity to wake up and enjoy life again. Robert Latimer decided not to give his daughter a life. He said he loved his daughter, then why the hell would he have killed her in the first place? Did he ever consider her before himself? He did not know what she was feeling inside of her. He had no clue. He didn't think she had a voice to speak up.

This case is important to disability issues. People who commit first degree murder are people who plan to murder their victims. Robert William Latimer chose to get rid of his daughter. His crime is first degree murder. He was convicted of second degree murder. His murder was considered different by people in court and society. This was a mercy killing in their eyes. What kind of society would let this case go by? If Tracy was not disabled it would have led to first degree murder. There is no equality. People with disabilities are devalued with this type of thinking.

I am 22 years old and I have Down syndrome. I lived 21 years without knowing that I had this. I wondered why I wasn't told. I grew up to respect people with differences. My mother is Catholic. My father is Muslim. As we were

growing up, I remember E., who was my mother's client. He was blind and could not walk. He had a tube feed and a tube in his throat. I never saw him as a disabled person. I remember having a birthday party when I was 7 years old with my brother and our classes. Everyone was invited. E. could not go in the swimming pool so he swam in another pool. We made him an extra pool with fresh water. We put tape over his tube so he could be with everybody. The kids thought he was the same as them.

I never went to a segregated school. I was with everybody. I had no clue that I had this disability. I grew up in a tolerant environment. One time I went to Upstate New York with my family to sit on Harriet Tubman's doorstep. She helped slaves who were black people to escape. My mom told me that it was important to be there because society was ugly and she wanted to teach me about human rights. I grew up in this environment.

I asked my mother why I wasn't told about having Down syndrome. She told me that Down syndrome was a part of me and not all of me. She wanted me to grow up feeling part of society. My mother told me that when she was pregnant with my other four brothers she was asked to test for Down syndrome. My mother refused. She explained that the doctors wanted testing because if the babies had Down syndrome, the doctors would suggest abortion. When my brother had brain damage, the doctors told my mother to pull the cord so he could pass away. My mother refused. What does this show about the attitude of the medical profession? What does this tell you about how society values people with disabilities? The Robert Latimer trial shows that negative attitudes towards people with disabilities haven't changed. I wonder if Tracy Latimer ever had the chance to live her life like me? The answer is no.