

I got 99 problems ... palsy is just one

Maysoon Zayid

My name is Maysoon Zayid, and I am not drunk, but the doctor who delivered me was. He cut my mom six different times in six different directions, suffocating poor little me in the process. As a result, I have cerebral palsy, which means I shake all the time. Look. It's exhausting. I'm like Shakira, Shakira meets Muhammad Ali.

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CP (cerebral palsy) is not genetic. It's not a birth defect. You can't catch it. No one put a curse on my mother's uterus, and I didn't get it because my parents are first cousins, which they are.

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It only happens from accidents, like what happened to me on my birth day.

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Now, I must warn you, I'm not inspirational.

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And I don't want anyone in this room to feel bad for me, because at some point in your life, you have dreamt of being disabled. Come on a journey with me. It's Christmas Eve, you're at the mall, you're driving around in circles looking for parking, and what do you see? Sixteen empty handicapped spaces.

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And you're like, "God, can't I just be a little disabled?"

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Also, I've got to tell you, I've got 99 problems, and palsy is just one.

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If there was an Oppression Olympics, I would win the gold medal. I'm Palestinian, Muslim, I'm female, I'm disabled, and I live in New Jersey.

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If you don't feel better about yourself, maybe you should.

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Cliffside Park, New Jersey is my hometown. I have always loved the fact that my hood and my affliction share the same initials. I also love the fact that if I wanted to walk from my house to New York City, I could.

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A lot of people with CP don't walk, but my parents didn't believe in "can't." My father's mantra was, "You can do it, yes you can can."

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(Laughter) So, if my three older sisters were mopping, I was mopping. If my three older sisters went to public school, my parents would sue the school system and guarantee that I went too, and if we didn't all get A's, we all got my mother's slipper.

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My father taught me how to walk when I was five years old by placing my heels on his feet and just walking. Another tactic that he used is he would dangle a dollar bill in front of me and have me chase it.

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My inner stripper was very strong.

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Yeah. No, by the first day of kindergarten, I was walking like a champ who had been punched one too many times.

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Growing up, there were only six Arabs in my town, and they were all my family.

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Now there are 20 Arabs in town, and they are still all my family.

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I don't think anyone even noticed we weren't Italian.

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This was before 9/11 and before politicians thought it was appropriate to use "I hate Muslims" as a campaign slogan. The people that I grew up with had no problem with my faith. They did, however, seem very concerned that I would starve to death during Ramadan. I would explain to them that I have enough fat to live off of for three whole months, so fasting from sunrise to sunset is a piece of cake.

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I have tap-danced on Broadway. Yeah, on Broadway. It's crazy.

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My parents couldn't afford physical therapy, so they sent me to dancing school. I learned how to dance in heels, which means I can walk in heels. And I'm from Jersey, and we are really concerned with being chic, so if my friends wore heels, so did I.

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And when my friends went and spent their summer vacations on the Jersey Shore, I did not. I spent my summers in a war zone, because my parents were afraid that if we didn't go back to Palestine every single summer, we'd grow up to be Madonna.

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Summer vacations often consisted of my father trying to heal me, so I drank deer's milk, I had hot cups on my back, I was dunked in the Dead Sea, and I remember the water burning my eyes and thinking, "It's working! It's working!"

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But one miracle cure we did find was yoga. I have to tell you, it's very boring, but before I did yoga, I was a stand-up comedian who can't stand up. And now I can stand on my head. My parents reinforced this notion that I could do anything, that no dream was impossible, and my dream was to be on the daytime soap opera "General Hospital."

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I went to college during affirmative action and got a sweet scholarship to ASU, Arizona State University, because I fit every single quota.

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I was like the pet lemur of the theater department. Everybody loved me. I did all the less-than-intelligent kids' homework, I got A's in all of my classes, A's in all of their classes.

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Every time I did a scene from "The Glass Menagerie," my professors would weep. But I never got cast. Finally, my senior year, ASU decided to do a show called "They Dance Real Slow in Jackson." It's a play

about a girl with CP. I was a girl with CP. So I start shouting from the rooftops, "I'm finally going to get a part! I have cerebral palsy! Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, I'm free at last!" I didn't get the part.

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Sherry Brown got the part. I went racing to the head of the theater department crying hysterically, like someone shot my cat, to ask her why, and she said it was because they didn't think I could do the stunts. I said, "Excuse me, if I can't do the stunts, neither can the character."

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This was a part that I was literally born to play they gave it to a non-palsy actress. College was imitating life. Hollywood has a sordid history of casting able-bodied actors to play disabled onscreen.

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Upon graduating, I moved back home, and my first acting gig was as an extra on a daytime soap opera. My dream was coming true. And I knew that I would be promoted from "Diner Diner" to "Wacky Best Friend" in no time.

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But instead, I remained a glorified piece of furniture that you could only recognize from the back of my head, and it became clear to me that casting directors didn't hire fluffy, ethnic, disabled actors. They only hired perfect people. But there were exceptions to the rule. I grew up watching Whoopi Goldberg, Roseanne Barr, Ellen, and all of these women had one thing in common: they were comedians. So I became a comic.

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My first gig was driving famous comics from New York City to shows in New Jersey, and I'll never forget the face of the first comic I ever drove when he realized that he was speeding down the New Jersey Turnpike with a chick with CP driving him.

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I've performed in clubs all over America, and I've also performed in Arabic in the Middle East, uncensored and uncovered.

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Some people say I'm the first stand-up comic in the Arab world. I never like to claim first, but I do know that they never heard that nasty little rumor that women aren't funny, and they find us hysterical.

09:07

In 2003, my brother from another mother and father Dean Obeidallah and I started the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival, now in its 10th year. Our goal was to change the negative image of Arab-Americans in media, while also reminding casting directors that South Asian and Arab are not synonymous.

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Mainstreaming Arabs was much, much easier than conquering the challenge against the stigma against disability.

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My big break came in 2010. I was invited to be a guest on the cable news show "Countdown with Keith Olbermann." I walked in looking like I was going to the prom, and they shuffle me into a studio and seat me on a spinning, rolling chair.

10:01

So I looked at the stage manager and I'm like, "Excuse me, can I have another chair?" And she looked at me and she went, "Five, four, three, two ..." And we were live, right? So I had to grip onto the anchor's desk so that I wouldn't roll off the screen during the segment, and when the interview was over, I was livid. I had finally gotten my chance and I blew it, and I knew I would never get invited back. But not only did Mr. Olbermann invite me back, he made me a full-time contributor, and he taped down my chair.

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One fun fact I learned while on the air with Keith Olbermann was that humans on the Internet are scumbags.

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(Laughter) People say children are cruel, but I was never made fun of as a child or an adult. Suddenly, my disability on the world wide web is fair game. I would look at clips online and see comments like, "Yo, why's she tweakin'?" "Yo, is she retarded?" And my favorite, "Poor Gumby-mouth terrorist. What does she suffer from? We should really pray for her." One commenter even suggested that I add my disability to my credits: screenwriter, comedian, palsy.

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Disability is as visual as race. If a wheelchair user can't play Beyoncé, then Beyoncé can't play a wheelchair user. The disabled are the largest — Yeah, clap for that, man. Come on.

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People with disabilities are the largest minority in the world, and we are the most underrepresented in entertainment.

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The doctors said that I wouldn't walk, but I am here in front of you. However, if I grew up with social media, I don't think I would be. I hope that together, we can create more positive images of disability in the media and in everyday life. Perhaps if there were more positive images, it would foster less hate on the Internet. Or maybe not. Maybe it still takes a village to teach our children well.

12:20

My crooked journey has taken me to some very spectacular places. I got to walk the red carpet flanked by soap diva Susan Lucci and the iconic Loreen Arbus. I got to act in a movie with Adam Sandler and work with my idol, the amazing Dave Matthews. I toured the world as a headliner on Arabs Gone Wild. I was a delegate representing the great state of New Jersey at the 2008 DNC. And I founded Maysoon's Kids, a charity that hopes to give Palestinian refugee children a sliver of the chance my parents gave me. But the one moment that stands out the most was when I got -- before this moment --

13:12

But the one moment that stands out the most was when I got to perform for the man who floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee, has Parkinson's and shakes just like me, Muhammad Ali.

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It was the only time that my father ever saw me perform live, and I dedicate this talk to his memory.

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(Arabic) Allah yerhamak yaba.

13:46

(English) My name is Maysoon Zayid, and if I can can, you can can.