

Golisano Foundation, Special Olympics team up for Spread the Word campaign

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Rochester, N.Y. — The Golisano Foundation and Special Olympics International are teaming up for their Spread the Word to End the Word campaign and are encouraging the Rochester community to take a stand against using the R-word — “retard” or “retarded.”

Spread the Word to End the Word was started by youth and is an ongoing effort of Special Olympics International, Best Buddies and other supporters to raise awareness of the dehumanizing and hurtful effects of the word and encourage people to pledge to stop using it.

“We’re people; we have something to give in life,” said Vincent Paulino, of Webster, who has a developmental disability. “You shouldn’t put labels down on people with disabilities. It’s not right. It’s judging a book by its cover.”

The awareness campaign includes television and radio public service announcements featuring Tom Golisano, chairman of the Golisano Foundation, that will air leading up to the national day of awareness on March 2. People can also take the pledge year-round.

“Most people who use the words ‘retard’ or ‘retarded’ do not mean to be hateful, but to the millions of people around the world have intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities, and their families and friends, it is hurtful and as cruel and offensive as any other slur,” said Ann Costello, director of the Golisano Foundation. “We believe that with greater awareness, Rochester can lead the way nationally, and inspire other communities to make a dramatic change — and to think before using words that perpetuate the stigma and negative stereotypes.”

Among the organizations that have taken the pledge are The Institute for Innovative Transition at the University of Rochester, The Harley School, Pi Kappa Phi Fraternity at the Rochester Institute of Technology, EquiCenter, Rochester Ice Cats and Gliding Stars.

Marisa Geitner, executive vice president and chief operating officer of Heritage Christian Services, a human services agency supporting more than 1,500 children and adults with developmental disabilities, has also taken the pledge.

“The word sets people apart and is used in a context that is disparaging,” she said. “It’s far past time to stop using that word. People with or without disabilities have come together and decided it’s not a word that should be used anymore.”

The use of the word has evolved over the years into a derogatory term that places a label on a group of people, said Geitner.

“The definition of the word is more a reference to the pace at which someone moves, the pace at which someone learns,” she said. “I do see it used in reference to the potential capability of a person with or without a disability. ... It’s not often used in a way that is not disrespectful.”

Paulino agreed.

“I just look at them as they’re ignorant,” he said. “Sometimes I tell people to please talk to me. Don’t talk at me — talk to me.”

Our society’s use of the word, added Geitner, needs to change.

“It’s important to continue to grow and learn as a society,” she said. “It’s not a word to be taken lightly. One of the greatest dangers to a society is to become numb to the words it uses, and I think, as a society, we have to look at the words we use.”

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