

Kate Elliott

What Being Tall Means to Me

It's almost a feeling of panic. The familiar heaviness in my chest, the rapid heart rate, the flush across my face. Do I smile and make them feel okay? Or do I let them know that they are the fourth person today who has commented and that their observations are nothing new, nothing interesting, and nothing I need to hear? Instead, I give the usual polite laugh and try to move quickly along before further questions follow: "Do you play volleyball? Basketball?" "How tall are you exactly?"

There are so many challenges that individuals face, and, undoubtedly, each uniquely affects those enduring them. In my case, I am a 6'2" female, and I might as well have eight arms for how many people find this peculiar. Every day since I was 14, someone has asked me how tall I am. These constant interactions are not what bother me, however. It is the reminder that their questions bring- I am different from society's norms. While it is undeniably socially unacceptable to go up to others and tell them they are overweight or comment that their skin is a certain shade, height is fair game. These repeated comments led to feelings of insecurity and hyper-criticism of myself. I in turn compensated, hoping that if others approved of me then the drawback of my height would somehow be minimized.

I wish I could say this is a challenge I have overcome and conquered, but honestly, it is an ongoing struggle that I am still learning to navigate. Yet, as I navigate, I grow. I have discovered a tender heart toward others who are “different” too. I have learned to never point out an aspect of another person that they do not have the ability to fix within the next thirty seconds. Shirt on inside out: Tell them. Skin condition: No comment needed. Understanding what it feels like to be outside of societal norms has developed tremendous empathy in me toward others who do not fall into the stereotypical fold. I chase my special needs “buddy” in circles for hours at Miracle League because she “just wants to play” and other kids won’t allow her to join on the playground. I sit in small, cramped back rooms with toddlers hanging over me so that their moms, who have survived sex trafficking, can attend therapeutic groups. In all these spaces I want people to know I see them as individuals- not the labels society has grouped them under.

I have learned that I am strong and gentle. I might not play the sport everyone thinks I should, but I have been a four-year varsity athlete in the sport of my choosing- soccer. I have found that I can see the entire field of play, stay calm, and direct action. But I also notice the player who sits on the bench and can offer words of comfort. I am attuned to the athlete who is beating up on herself and can give encouragement. These are

qualities I may not have discovered had I followed society's roadmap for me, but they are ones that will undoubtedly serve me well.

I have learned not to be defined by the perceptions anyone else has of me. I am not just one thing, my height; I am a person with feelings, wisdom, empathy, and tenacity. I do not want to shrink and make myself small; Instead, I will be a force in the world and will encourage others to do the same. I do not blend in. So, though my "height mark" may be remarkable as it rests higher on the wall than most others', I am grateful for the lessons this dash has taught me- to be true to myself, welcoming to all, and judgmental toward none. I treat others kindly, understanding that I may never know what experiences their "height mark" may hold.