

REGION

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'You need to believe us'

Speaker discusses 'invisible disabilities' suffered by one in 10

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BLOOMSBURG — One in 10 people have an invisible disability — a lifelong illness that is not immediately recognizable to onlookers, but affects daily life, an expert said.

Speaker Christina Irene, addressing nearly 200 people at a recent gathering at Bloomsburg University's McCormick Hall, said those disabilities affect every area of someone's life, from work to romance to getting up in the morning.

Irene, who has roots in comedy and education, struggles with fibromyalgia and osteoarthritis and encouraged those in the audience to allow other people in their lives to define themselves.

"I am," she said, smiling, "a warrior who has fibromyalgia."

Irene drew the audience into the presentation, inviting about 10 volunteers, all of whom were Bloomsburg University Students, up on stage to gain a better understanding of what its like to live with an invisible disability.

As she read through a story, students feigned disgust and fled from the stage when she referred to a certain word or concept, with others on stage not knowing why the students left the stage.

Irene likened this to having an invisible disability, with others not understanding how you feel or what you do.

She described a night when she had a "fibro flair," which saw her in bed hoping to get some much-needed rest.

In bed, already disappointed that she was missing out on activities, she received

a call from a friend who insisted that she come out for a drink.

"She blew up my phone, she wouldn't let it go," she said.

Irene said not only was she disappointed that she wasn't able to go out with her friends, she was also using her energy to try to explain to her friend why she couldn't go out.

"You need to believe us," she said, referring to those with all kinds of disabilities.

But, even though Irene has made spreading the message her full-time job, as a former comedian, she brings a lot of humor and laughter to the stage with her.

When she asked for volunteers to accompany her in the front of the room, she looked at Bloom University students Chad Cooperman and Ryan Shiffer, and said, "You were both pointing at one another. Both of you come up."

And with the two students, both baseball players, assisting her, she dropped papers, lost cards and nearly tripped.

This was, she said, part of the learning process.

"I'm competitive, so I'm going to go home and go through every second in my head," she said. "If I was someone else, I could have done this perfectly, but I'm not them, I'm me."

Irene said she was tired and a bit weather-affected, but relying on understanding from audience members.

American Sign Language students in the audience gave their full attention to the speaker and the sign language interpreter.



It was nearly standing-room-only in a lecture room in McCormick Hall, above, recently as **Christina Irene** discussed "Invisible Disabilities Awareness."

Irene, in photo at left, smiles while giving her presentation on the campus of Bloomsburg University.

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According to Irene, deafness is an invisible disability, but the list is a long one and includes depression, allergies, Asperger's syndrome, lupus, Lyme disease and personality disorders.

Baseball coach Mike Collins brought more than 20 members of the team out to learn about appropriately

dealing with those with visible and invisible disabilities.

"Disabilities affect all different kinds of people," he said. "It's important to be able to understand others."

The free event was sponsored by the university's Disability Advisory Committee.

"We had some deaf people in the audience," said staff interpreter Marybeth Bergen. "This an opportunity for our students to observe an interpreter."