**Mutiny Arises Against the “R-Word”**

By Dana Leonard

It was supposed to be a fun and carefree day at Sea World in San Diego, California for Jill Brown. However, the day took an unfortunate turn when she overheard two teenage girls in bathroom. “What? She really did that? How retarded!” said one girl as the others laughed. Jill ran out of the bathroom crying, thinking the girls were making fun of her.

Jill Brown is 34 years old and has Down syndrome. She is one of many people with disabilities who are distraught and upset when they hear the word “retarded.” The “r-word” has become a common vocabulary staple in our country and used as a derogatory and slang term. When searching “retarded” on [Urban Dictionary](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=retarded), results show:

* “The state of being high, as in the Black Eyed Peas song, ‘Let’s Get Retarded!’”
* “The act of getting wasted on drink or drugs.”
* “Another word for cool, dope, tight, chill, or whatever you say when you like something.”

Nowhere does it describe the literal meaning of retarded, according to Apple Dictionary:

* “Less advanced in mental, physical, or social development than is usual for one’s age.”

As a student on a college campus, the “r-word” is heard throughout conversations daily. Is there an understanding of the hurtful meaning this word entails? Marquette University is taking strides to help terminate the use of this word by participating in the “Spread the Word to End the Word Campaign.”

“We were encouraging people as they walked by to come and sign their name to pledge that they wouldn’t say the r-word anymore” says Bess Featherstone, Publicity Coordinator for Marquette’s Best Buddies Club. The Best Buddies Club is an active group on campus who build friendships and bonds with adults who have disabilities.

The critically acclaimed George Clooney film, *The Descendants*, which opened in November, has received Oscar buzz and has ranked high on the list of the year’s best films. However, despite its praise, many individuals are opposing this film and encouraging others to do the same. *The Descendants* uses the “r-word” many times in a demeaning way and makes fun of those who have mental disabilities.

In an excerpt from the dialogue in the film,

*Clooney’s character, Matt, says, “You are so retarded.” Nick Krause’s character, Sid, replies, “That’s not nice.  I have a retarded brother.” Matt looks shocked. Sid goes on to say, “I’m just kidding. I don’t have a retarded brother. Sometimes when old people and retarded people are slow I just want to make them hurry up.”*

*Clooney’s character continues to say:*

*I face my daughter, “You know you’re dating a complete retard. You know that, don’t you?”  “My brother’s retarded, man.” Sid says. “Don’t use it in a derogatory way.”  “Oh.” I don’t say anything more hoping he’ll interpret my silence as an apology.  “Psych,” he says and now kicks the back of my seat. “I don’t have a retarded brother!” His little trick is giving him a great amount of amusement. “Speaking of the retarded,” he says, “do you ever feel bad for wishing a retarded person or an old person or a disabled person would hurry up? Sometimes I wait for them to cross the street and I’m like, ‘Come on already!’ but then I feel bad.*

From a media ethics standpoint, “using such a derogatory word in such, lets say, a playful manner is both hurtful and harmful to the people who suffer this disability because it is not their choice,” says Nick Labinski, a Ethical Problems of Mass Communications instructor at Marquette University.

The “[Spread the Word to End the Word](http://www.r-word.org)” website has voiced their concerns about *The Descendants.* “Your precious free time is too valuable to be surprised with disappointment and hurt in the two hours you looked so forward to and coordinate so hard to make it happen. See or do something else,” expresses Ryan, a blogger for the website.

“There are much better words to use than the r-word because in this case, this person is choosing to be incompetent, stupid, idiotic, and your calling them something that by no definition of choice as far as I know from ethical science that they are choosing to act that way or be that way. It’s something that they were with from birth usually,” Labinski remarks. “It’s not something to be made fun of lightly.”