Disability Pride: Raising expectations on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities

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The United Nations’ International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPWD) has been observed since 1992. Over the past 30 years, themes of the IDPWD have ranged from ‘A voice of our own’ in 2003 and ‘Nothing about us without us’ in 2004, to ‘Removing barriers to create an inclusive and accessible society for all’ in 2021 and ‘Break barriers, open doors: for an inclusive society and development for all’ in 2013.

This year’s theme, ‘Transformative solutions for inclusive development: the role of innovation in fuelling an accessible and equitable world’ is inspired by a recognition of what the United Nations calls the ‘complex and interconnected crises facing humanity today’ and an acknowledgement that people with disability are among the most vulnerable to exclusion and risk of being left behind. This acknowledgement begs the question – what has changed for people with disability over the past 30 years?

At the Scope-University of Melbourne Partnership’s recent Virtual Disability Conference, about 400 members of the disability community came together to explore the ways to raise expectations of and for disabled people. Inaccessibility – in physical spaces, and in communication – has effectively locked many people out of participating in forums where ideas are exchanged about their lives and their community. The decision to hold this conference, which has been held online biennially since 2018 (well before COVID lockdowns), with built-in accessibility features such as Auslan interpretation and live captioning, was a decision based on the principles of equity and inclusion. We wanted as many people as possible in the disability community to be able to access and contribute cutting edge knowledge and innovative ideas about how we might overcome, in the words of Graeme Innes AM, the “soft bigotry of low expectations’ that is experienced by so many people with disabilities in our society”.

Our keynote speaker, Senator Jordon Steele-John, one of the youngest people to ever be elected to the Federal Parliament, and the first person with a physical disability to be elected to the Australian Senate. Jordon challenged the audience with a vision of a different way of thinking about disability. He shared his views on Disability Pride, a concept well established in the scholarly literature (e.g., the work of Barnes, Goodley, Oliver and Shakespeare) but rarely discussed in the public domain.

Disability Pride rejects widespread ableism, structural disadvantage, inaccessibility and the low expectations frequently encountered by disabled people and offers our community a transformative solution to be a truly inclusive society. So, on this International Day of Persons with Disabilities, Jordon shares some of his reflections on disability here.

For a long time, we’ve seen disabled people figuratively and physically locked out of decision-making spaces. As a result, so many of us have witnessed the systems that are supposed to support us fall short again and again. For me to be able to use my office in Parliament House and
to be able to take my seat in the Senate, the spaces literally needed to be rebuilt. Disabled people and our expertise are undoubtedly at the heart of solving these problems. I’m sure every disabled person listening today would probably agree that if it were up to us to design support systems, they likely wouldn’t look very much like they do now. But every year that I’ve been in Parliament, I can honestly say that I see progress. It’s often much slower than I would like…but I see it.

In Australia there are so many things that we’ve achieved as a community over the last few years, from bringing about our own disability royal commission, to stopping independent assessments in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). When we unite towards a common goal the disability community is truly a force to be reckoned with.

One of the things that I feel have really pushed forward my own personal understanding of disability, why we currently face some of the societal issues we do, and how we might move beyond them - is disability pride. It brings me so much joy to hear more and more people becoming aware of disability pride as a concept and as a movement.

To me, disability pride means acknowledging that there is a lot more to being disabled than a diagnosis or a list of symptoms - as the medical model of disability would have us believe. Disability pride comes from a process of self-acceptance, unpacking internalised ableism and letting go of learnt shame. It is centred around untangling the ideas of disability and tragedy.

It’s about blatantly rejecting the idea that being disabled means you are inherently tragic and unimportant, doomed to rely on the kindness of others and unable to achieve anything on your own merit. As grim as it sounds, society still tells disabled people these things all the time - whether it means to or not. Through the ableism we experience, big or small. Through the inaccessibility of the world around us, through lack of representation, through failing systems, through funding cuts, through lack of support, through governments that forget about us, decision makers that don’t care about us and through low expectations.

Disability pride is about recognising all of these things, calling them out and often - proving expectations wrong. This IDPWD theme is transformative solutions for inclusive development and the role of innovation in fuelling an accessible and equitable world. Well I struggle to think of a more innovative group than disabled people themselves. I can’t think of anyone better to lead that charge than disabled people empowered by pride.

If you’d like to view Jordon’s keynote address to the Virtual Disability Conference, you can watch it here.