

Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre tops Access Award honours

Awards told better inclusion benefits everyone

Exceptional support for volunteers with disabilities, mental health issues and other life difficulties has earned Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre the top prize at last week's 2015 Tweed Shire Access and Inclusion Awards presentation.

A capacity crowd at the Tweed Heads Civic Centre on 3 December was told the Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre's small team of paid staff and large team of volunteers had a supportive culture that fosters access, inclusion and diversity.

As the centre's activities have expanded to meet growing community needs, the team has established a warm, welcoming and safe workplace that encourages universal participation in its services, programs, leisure and support groups.

"We just don't see disability. Our approach has always been to find a way around a situation so all our participants can contribute according to their desires and aspirations," Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre Manager Angela Maxwell said.

"We have had so many beautiful experiences by working alongside people who experience and overcome barriers."

Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre, which was also a prize winner in 2014, was confirmed as the 2015 overall winner after it claimed this year's category for community organisations – one of four category winners on the night.

A crowd of 240 people was treated to a night of music, dancing and films showcasing the principles of inclusion and the achievements of people with disability, as well as high-calibre speakers of local and international acclaim.

After an opening address by the awards' new patron, multiple paratriathlon world champion Bill Chaffey, author and Equal Access and Advisory Committee Chair Milena Morrow told the ceremony that overcoming community perception was the greatest challenge to achieving improved inclusion for everyone.

"While we continue to address the environmental and physical barriers, we will also address the most challenging barrier that no one can see, and the most difficult one to change - societal attitudes," Ms Morrow said.

"Accessibility is really about one community; one people, not a community divided up into separate groups. An accessible environment benefits everyone at some stage in their life, and no matter what happens to an individual, accessibility will ensure they can continue to get on with their lives."

Keynote speaker Graeme Innes, a former Australian Disability Discrimination Commissioner and delegate to the United Nations, said society will not be fair and properly functioning until it challenges the negative assumptions made about people.

"There are many reasons why people with disabilities should take control of our lives - but basically they come down to the reality that societies work better if all members are included, and that societies are less functional if there are people excluded, or on the margins," he said.

"These precepts have been recognised by most societies throughout history - that it's not beneficial for 45 per cent of one group of society to live below the poverty line, that it's not beneficial for one group in society to be employed at a participation rate 30 per cent less than the general population.

"But despite knowing that marginalisation is not good for society, that's what we do to people with disabilities."

To see all of the speeches by Graeme Innes and Milena Morrow and for more information about the awards, its winners and nominees, visit www.yoursaytweed.com.au/AccessInclusionAwards

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