

2015 Tweed Shire Access and Inclusion Awards

Transcript of speech by Equal Access and Advisory Committee Chair Milena Morrow

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the Access and Inclusion Awards for 2015. It is wonderful to see such a large turnout at an event that we are very proud of and one that truly celebrates inclusiveness in the Tweed Shire and on International Day of People with Disability.

I have had the privilege of serving on the Equal Access Advisory Committee for many years with other community and council representatives who are dedicated and committed to a common cause — to create an inclusive and equitable community. In that time we've seen numerous changes, improvements and achievements. And one of the many achievements has been the success of the Access and Inclusion Awards which have now been running for three years, and each year has been bigger than the previous. To us, this represents everyone working together as a community which is clearly demonstrated by the number of nominations received, and the full house that we have here tonight in support.

The other major achievement was that Tweed Shire Council developed an Access and Inclusion Plan as part of their commitment and in which we assist Council in an advisory capacity. One of the most recent and large projects completed as part of that plan was to conduct an access audit of all currently designated accessible public toilets across the entire shire and I believe there were around 36 of them. The outcome of the audit will have them updated to proper and current standards. This is just one of many projects that will be undertaken as part of the Access and Inclusion Plan. We consider this to be a giant step towards inclusiveness, so we are very appreciative of the collaborative and supportive approach demonstrated by Tweed Shire Council.

I've always known accessibility to be attached to disability only, but as a committee, we promote accessibility quite differently. Accessibility is really about one community; one people. Not a community divided up into separate groups.

We will always maintain that 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. Even for ordinary people, whether temporary or permanent, young, middle-aged or elderly, for one reason or another, do use crutches, a cane, a walking frame or wheelchair. Some experience arthritic pain, while others have problems with their hips and knees. People who are vision impaired are accompanied by their guide dogs, those who are hearing impaired and mothers with prams. The examples of the realities of life are endless.

Inclusion, more than ever before, is being promoted on a national scale. Australia and countries all over the world have signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. To capture the general principle of the UN Convention in a nutshell is to "have respect for difference and acceptance for people with disability as part of human diversity and humanity, where there is no discrimination, equal opportunities and accessibility". This is a universal move and it is the way of the future; and one that has been long awaited. I have known many Australians who have dedicated their lives to fight and pave the way for current and future generations in the hope that they will not experience the



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same struggles and societal exclusion. Until now, government policy, funding conditions and a range of other causes inadvertently created that separation from mainstream. Separation from one's community was never the choice. Separation is unnatural, as everyone has an inherent need to belong. It doesn't matter who you are, where you live, or what your circumstances.

This has led to one of the most ground breaking changes to social policy seen in this country for over two decades, where people with disability and families for the first time are given choice and control and they will be the one to decide what their destiny will be, as we watch the National Disability Insurance Scheme gradually roll out across the nation. This involves a total philosophical shift in thinking and it requires us to create a new world where we all embrace diversity and everyone has access to the same opportunities in life — and there is no turning back. Now is the time to look at how we view each other and recognise each person's worth.

So let me share a quote that I think sums it up:

"If I lived in a society where being in a wheelchair was no more remarkable than wearing glasses, and if the community was completely accepting and accessible, my disability would be an inconvenience and not much more than that. It is society which disables me far more seriously and completely than the fact that I have Spina Bifida."

I know many of us can relate to that. You learn how to improvise and work around your disability and, of course, there are so many ways to do something, but those ways can only be seen by the people who can't do it in the traditional way.

So 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. This is another area that the Equal Access Advisory Committee is focused on. In order to increase community awareness, we are attempting to think up innovative ways and means to raise the profile of people with disability in the Tweed Shire in a number of ways. We encourage people to tell their stories, as people relate well to stories. So our committee will continue to do its part.

Before I close, I would like to offer my thanks to those who have made this event possible:

- Kristian Keogh - our MC and one of our entertainers tonight
- Bill Chaffey – patron for the access and inclusion awards
- To Tweed Shire Council and all the members of the Steering Committee who did an amazing job in organising this event, and a thank you to Karen Collins for your extremely hard work
- The Lifebridge Catering service who do a wonderful job
- To the wonderful members who serve with me on the Equal Access Advisory Committee. I look forward to our continued work together

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- And I would like to offer a very special thank you to Graeme Innes, a national icon, Australia's former Disability Discrimination Commissioner and a strong advocate for the equal rights of people with disability. We are truly honoured to have you celebrate this occasion with us, and I would like to acknowledge that we do appreciate the time you have taken out of your very busy schedule. I did find out that you had two engagements today, flew up to attend tonight, and will fly out first thing tomorrow morning to another engagement. So thank you for your time Graeme.

If I have missed anyone it is not deliberate, so in case I have, thank you.

I'd like to congratulate all nominees here this evening. Whatever the outcome, you are all winners as clearly you have been recognised for the contribution you made towards access and inclusion.

We have a great line up of entertainment tonight so I hope you all enjoy the evening. Thank you.