

2015 Tweed Shire Access and Inclusion Awards



Transcript of speech by keynote speaker Graeme Innes – Former Australian Disability Discrimination Commissioner and delegate to the United Nations

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today. Good evening.

I am an unusual presenter. While most presenters tell you to turn off your mobile phones, I want you to get them out. Because I want you to get on Facebook, Twitter, or your social network of choice, and tell your friends where you are, why you are here, and who you are listening to. Share your support for these awards. Encourage your friends to join you in that support. And if you like what I have to say, tweet or Facebook it, I'm on Twitter at graemeinnes, or facebook at Graeme linnes AM. If you don't like what I'm saying, put your phone away.

I have a beautiful daughter, who is now 18, but grew up during the time I was a Commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission. My job as Commissioner required me to travel interstate, or occasionally internationally. I fly, on average, once a week.

Why have I given you these two seemingly unrelated pieces of information? Well, the love of dads for their daughters is well recognised as special, and it meant that every time I travelled, Rachel expects me to return with a present. And her expectations are usually realised. Often it was a soft toy - I think that her collection at one stage totalled 86.

Now, buying these soft toys, or Teds as we call them in our family, has - for me - a mostly negative impact, although Rachel enjoyed them. Certainly I experienced the joy of giving. But they cost me money, they filled up our house, and she usually threw the nearest one at me when I woke her in the morning. So, for a while, I've pondered what other positive benefits I could gain from them.

One benefit has been to provide me with the acronym of principles for awards presentations - of which I make a few; the acronym Teds. Firstly, such speeches should be topical - you must consider your audience, and make the speech relevant. Secondly, they must be entertaining, using humour, questions, and challenges to keep the audience engaged. Thirdly, they must be descriptive - making key points with the telling of stories. And finally, they must be short. So, when I come to the end of this speech and you rate it with your applause, please consider whether it has met the Teds test.

Why are we here tonight? There are many answers to that question. Some might say to see friends; others, because my partner told me. But really, we're here to provide support for an event which recognises Australians with disabilities - 20 per cent of our population, or one in five. And it's very appropriate to do that on the International Day of People with Disabilities - although I think we should do it all year around. That's of course why you have an access committee - to ensure that Council keeps disability issues top of mind - issues which impact on 20 per cent of the population, or one in five Tweed residents.

And can I just say that your committee has a hugely valuable asset - Faye Druett. Faye worked as the Executive Officer of the most effective advocacy organisation in Australia, and also worked to establish the Disability Discrimination Act under Commissioner Elizabeth



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Hastings when it was first passed. If I can use a Star Wars analogy, the force is strong in that one. So make sure you use her knowledge and wisdom - she has a lot.

People with disabilities are significantly disadvantaged - 45 per cent of us live in or near poverty, we are employed at a rate 30 per cent lower than the average population, and we are disproportionately highly represented in Australia's prisons - in fact so much so that prisons have become an alternative accommodation option for people with disabilities. So it's a damn good cause to support.

Many organisations ensure that many of us in the community with disabilities have more control of our lives. And that is worth your support for tonight's celebration. But it's not just about tonight – it's all year. And if you're serious about inclusion, you need to ask yourself the hard questions - what percentage of Council employees are people with disabilities, do you have hearing loops in your venues and are they accessible, does your library include audio books, do you have electronic voting in your council elections, is inclusion of people with disabilities one of the KPIs for funding sporting and community organisations, do all building applications you approve require access, and is your social housing accessible? When you can answer yes to all of those questions, you'll be achieving real inclusion.

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. 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, or that it's not beneficial when the Year 12 completion rate in the general population is 50 per cent, for people with disabilities to only have a completion rate of 25 per cent. But, despite knowing that marginalisation is not good for society, that's what we do to people with disabilities.

However, Australia is changing. A few years ago we ratified a UN convention - the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities – or, as I like to refer to it, the disability convention or the DisCo. Not just because of the Australian habit of shortening names, but because for me it creates this wonderful and positive image of people with a disability going everywhere in the community, including dancing at the DisCo; although, as the colour of my hair indicates, it's been a few years since my DisCo dancing days. I now do dad dancing, a great embarrassment to my teenage daughter.

We have also passed disability discrimination legislation, which I was pleased to administer for almost nine years. And several years ago, we as a community agreed to implement the NDIS. And surveys indicate that 78 per cent of us supported a 0.5 per cent increase in the Medicare levy to part-fund the scheme - the most popular tax increase in our nation's history.

These laws and conventions, and many others, seek to redress that societal imbalance. But



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they're not worth much without people with disabilities to utilise them.

Let me tell you some stories: one about shopping and the other about catching a train. And then, because they are always popular, a guide dog story. These stories illustrate the importance of using such legislation.

Gisele Mesnage wanted to do her supermarket shopping. She preferred, like many of us, to do it online. But because the Coles website didn't work properly with her screen reader - the device she, as a person with a disability, uses to access the internet, the supermarket shopping which would take you 20 minutes could take her up to six hours. Gisele lodged a discrimination complaint under the Disability Discrimination Act and recently settled her case against Coles. Her actions have made that website far more accessible. This resulted in a better online shopping experience for Gisele and many other people with disabilities who struggled to use the site. You've reduced marginalisation - well done Gisele.

Second story: I just wanted to catch the train but this was hard because Sydney Trains didn't announce each station. If you could see, their signs told you where you were, but for me that was about as helpful as someone telling me that the door I want is "just over there". Don't worry, it happens to me all the time.

I just wanted Sydney Trains to tell me where I was. So I took them to the Federal Court, and the money they spent on defending the matter in court could have been spent on better PA equipment, or training guards to make announcements. Pleasingly, I won that case. Announcements are now made much more frequently, providing a better travel experience for me, and for all commuters.

Now, my guide dog story. I had completed a meeting with some senior bank officials in Brisbane. Walking with my guide dog, I got into the elevator on the 30th floor of their building, at the same time as another person. The lift buttons were not marked with raised letters or braille, so I didn't know which one to press. Turning to the other man in the lift, I said: "Could you press the button for ground please?" I got no response.

Thinking that he may have a hearing impairment - I was Disability Discrimination Commissioner at the time - I looked directly at him, so he could read my lips, and said a little more clearly: "Could you press ground please?" Still no response.

Puzzled, I reached over and tapped him on the shoulder, and repeated my request. "Oh," he said, "Are you talking to me? I thought you were asking the guide dog."

My guide dog's good but she hasn't learned to read lift buttons yet!

Ok, so you like dog stories. Well my dog blogs. She gets on my website when I'm not looking. And if you like stories about her, or stories told by me, you can use the bookmarks which have been distributed to register to receive her blog, or pre-register for my memoirs, Finding a Way, which come out next July.

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Why have I told you these stories? Because we are here today to support a broader sort of thinking - ensuring that society caters for everyone, not just for people without disability. But this broader thinking is a responsibility we all share.

The then leader of Australia's military, David Morrison, recently said - in the context of inappropriate behaviour towards women - that the standards we walk past are the standards we accept. This raised the bar on that topic - making inappropriate behaviour a responsibility of the whole Australian Defence Force.

And inappropriate treatment of people with disability should also be the responsibility of all of us. We all need to think about the ways we can change our society to include everyone:

- Not just making our buildings and our buses accessible,
- Not just building more accessible websites,
- Not just making announcements on public transport,
- It's about changing our approach.

What should we do?

- Not disempower people by making it harder for them to shop or catch a train.
- Not accept that there is nothing we can do if a person cannot vote because they don't read or write in print.
- Not expect that everyone will behave in the same way. Because you can hear a question asked in a noisy restaurant, don't get cranky with the customer who asks you to look at them when you're speaking to them. They may have a hearing impairment.

Give some thought to why your employee is asking to work less hours for a month or two. With a few careful questions, you may discover that it is as a result of their mental illness.

We won't have a fair and properly functioning community until we include all of its different members. That's what these awards should be used to achieve. And we won't include everyone until we challenge the negative assumptions that are made about people.

One of the ways we might do that, or at least start to do that, is by turning some assumptions upside-down. For instance, I want all of you who did not bring your own chair with you today to please stand up. Come on, up you get. Now you all cost Tweed Shire Council extra because we had to bring you in a chair. Okay, sit back down on that lovely comfortable chair. Are you relaxed? Excellent.

Now, let's go a little further. Can we dim the light? Can we turn them off? Are you ready to listen in the dark? I am, what's your problem?

Finally, (move lips) did everyone get that sentence? You all did? What did I say? Oh, you can't lip-read? Ok, more cost for a public address system.

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You see, the problem with our society is that all of you able-bodied people are costing us so much extra, because of those chairs, lights, and loud-speakers you seem to need. If we could cut out those costs, the economy would be zinging along. On the other hand, perhaps we should show a little humanity and respect for your difference - I think I'll start a campaign for a national able-bodied insurance scheme. But seriously, while ever those negative assumptions are made, we'll need awards like these, and committees such as your access committee, to challenge them.

So join me to support people with disabilities, so we can keep challenging assumptions. And if you like the way I challenge assumptions, use those bookmarks.

Thanks for the chance to speak with you tonight.