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"A different Light"

A Different Light 15 September 2018 – Roll Playing

‘A lot of work to be done on wheelchair accessibility - Carmel Sepuloni’, hardly a bowel shattering revelation, but believe it or not, that was a news headline last week.

Minister Sepuloni, our Minister of Disability Issues spent a day in a wheelchair to better appreciate what it is like to be dependent on a wheelchair to get around. Might I say “WOW!” and not in a good way, in fact in a very sarcastic way. So according to Sepuloni’s logic, if I wear a lava lava or a sulu, I will know what it is like to be a Fijian? Hang on I am a Fijian! The European variety, with straight hair but, actually, seriously our politicians, both local and Central government, are they still pulling these sensationalist gags? Journalist Red Nicholson wrote a great article in The Spinoff, in response. He succinctly explained how patronising and disrespectful this kind of stunt is. “Our wheelchairs are not gimmicks to help you realise how good you’ve got it”. It’s a photo opp, ingenuine

Organisations have historically utilised this kind of tactic when they ‘do’ Disability Awareness Training. It’s known as Simulation Training. This is when you try to simulate a disability by, for instance, using wheelchair or blindfolds or earmuffs. Most disabled people would tell you, however, that what they want, is for others to be aware of the need to treat disabled people with respect and recognise their mana. It’s a simple concept that can be realised greatly by simply talking to people in a way that is mutually considerate, without being patronising. I have no doubt that everyone involved in the Ministers’ gig had the best of intentions from starting with the initial idea that came from the Spinal Cord Injury Trust. But seriously if disabled people had been consulted, this wouldn’t never have rolled out (pardon the pun). Where was her key adviser on Disability Issues? The Office of Disability Issues, are they disability lead? Questionable.

I have always been anti the idea of disability simulation training. Maybe the reason is that you can’t really simulate Cerebral Palsy. You can’t use ear muffs or blind folds or goggles or wheelchairs to do this. Maybe you could take vintage Quaaludes as Leonard de Caprio did when he played the lead in “In the Wolf of Wall Street” which took effect all at once resulting in Cerebral Palsy type symptoms. I don’t think that me being smashed on barbiturates would result in any transaction of mana!

What is effective is disabled people explaining the difference between a disabling environment and a non-disabling environment in the context of people's attitude or their physical surroundings.

The Minister of Disability Issues plays an integral role in the sector. This office is the interface between central government and the disabled population of New Zealand. The first Minister of Disability Issues was Ruth Dyson, briefly followed by Lianne Dalziel and then Tariana Turia. After Turia came the duffer of Ministers of Disability Issues, Minister Wagner who tweeted @nickywagner "Busy with Disability meetings in Auckland- rather be out on the harbour!" when she was meeting with a disabled advisory group.

The disabled community has been looking at their new Minister to see what kind of mark she will make.

I really hope Minister Sepuloni will get sound advice on the really BIG issues facing disabled people in New Zealand and take some bold actions. Geoffrey Palmer recently made by speech calling for a review to address the discrepancies between ACC and the support offered for those with a disability through the Ministry of Health. Now this is one of those BIG issues

I can tell you from personal experience that the disability support one gets from the Ministry of Health compared to the disability support one gets through ACC is like comparing night with day, black and white or Donald Trump and Barack Obama! I know disabled people who waited well over a year for an electric wheel chair, but when I fell over and broke my shoulder one appeared in two weeks.

Let's hope our Minister for Disability Issues gets advice from the Horse's mouth and not it's backside. Don't be a duffer. It's time to be bold and be genuine.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability - A Matter of Perception. A Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.