



Read our CEO **Jonny Wilkinson's** regular column in The Northern Advocate

"A different Light"

A Different Light 4 May 2019 – So far So close

She was only here for five nights. The last time I saw her was in January on the Gold Coast. I'm one of those grandparents who witters on about the highs and lows, the bitter sweet of having grand children living abroad. The lows are obvious; the absence, the disconnection from little ones who grow and develop at a disconcerting rate. The highs are little more complex. The joy of reunion and re-connection is peppered with the reality of another heart wrenching farewell when home time comes. The apprehension of whether they will remember you (or even still like you) is present, even when virtual connection is so readily available through smart phones.

My granddaughter, Isla, is four now. Articulating her thoughts and preferences robustly: red headed and strong willed. She recognises her Poppa instantly. She came over from Brisbane with her Auntie who was over for a wedding in Napier. When we met them at the Airport she climbed up on my mobility scooter straight away. She, (like my daughters having grown up around me) are so accustomed to my cerebral palsy, that they don't notice it -or at least that's what I thought until later that night, when she rather seriously took my hand saying, "Here Poppa, I'll help you."

It was very cute and very caring, but it was also a realisation that she understood that I was different, that I needed a hand sometimes. I find most kids are open minded about disability. Unashamedly curious, to the point of gaping-mouthed stares, when they encounter a sight they're not accustomed to. Those littlies who have grown up around disability have a level of comfort towards the diversity of the human condition. Their hungry brains are rapidly developing, creating new neural pathways. Interacting with disabled people establishes that 'difference' goes beyond big and small, young and old, boy and girl. Just as experiencing a range of ethnicities supports their concept of the dazzling array of humanity, so having opportunities to experience people with disabilities, enhances their inclusiveness, now and in the future.

Isla's five days over here seems even shorter because she is spending two days with her other Grandma, Narni, and multiple cuddies, Uncles and Aunts, attending a birthday on whanau farm land. Maintaining this connection to her turangawaewae and whanau is hugely important to Isla's overall development. We know she will have fun and full couple of days that she won't forget. We have to remind ourselves of this, as the house suddenly becomes very quiet.

I sat on my scooter as we waited for Isla to appear at the Arrivals gate at Auckland Airport. A toddler, standing next to me, with his parents, became fascinated with my scooter, starting to explore it. His Mum quickly drew him back, apologizing. I assured her that it was okay. It was more than okay. It was part of him developing an open minded appreciation of the diversity of the world around him, before social norms constrain him. When Isla offered to help me that first evening here, she did so with finesse. Holding out an unobtrusive but confident little hand, she modelled her means of support on what she had observed my wife and daughters doing over the years. She was equally comfortable climbing onto my walking frame, and making her Grammy push her out, as she sat on the wee seat, to show me 'Poppa's trolley'.

By the time this column is published, Isla will have winged her way back to Aussie, starting another period of absence from us. While we will keep up our virtual connection through video calling, that ever important physical and tactile connection will have to wait for the next Trans-Tasman foray. Hopefully, it won't be too long, and her hungry brain won't have ingested too much Aussie culture!

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