



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

"A different Light"

A Different Light 21 September 2019 – “State your piece – Inquiry into abuse in care”

Our very own Cameron Leslie was deservedly front and centre in the Northern Advocate again this week. Front page! The article was about him and another Northland para athlete, Emma Foy, after a fantastic weekend of results for the pair. Both are world champions in their respective codes. Leslie competed in the Para Swimming World Championships in London on Friday (London time), producing an incredible performance to set a new world record and claim the gold medal in the men's S4 50-metre freestyle. This is Leslie's fourth gold medal and his fourth world record. He is also a Wheel Blacks Player, a coach, a writer, a farmer and currently a National Para Swimming Development Coordinator. Is he an over achiever? No doubt!

Another disabled Northland over achiever is Loren Savage. She is a little person. She completed a double degree at the tender age of 22, with a Bachelor of Communications in Public Relations and Bachelor of Arts in Political Science at the University of Waikato. Her career has been on steroids since then, with her first job as Administration and Communications Coordinator for the Ministry of Social Development. She then snagged the role as an Advisor, System Transformation for the Ministry of Health. She now has a new role as a Senior Advisor, Community Engagement, Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care has been a long time coming. Advocates have relentlessly lobbied for an inquiry for a long time. People want to be listened to. They want their dark stories heard and they don't want the State to repeat them. The Inquiry will investigate the abuse of children, young people and vulnerable adults in the care of the State and/or faith-based institutions in New Zealand between 1950 and 1999. The inquiry may also look at cases of abuse and neglect that occurred outside of those years, including people who are in care now. This is particularly relevant for disabled people as they make up the majority of “vulnerable people” who have been in State care. They can also face huge

barriers when complaining about abuse. Young deaf children in this period of time, are a prime example. Many of them were sent to residential Deaf Schools where alleged abuse took place.

Okay- a quick history lesson in Sign Language. In Milan at a Deaf Education Conference in 1880, which consisted of merely two Deaf teachers, they decided to effectively ban sign language worldwide. Deaf children in New Zealand were required to be separated from their families and live at the school, where sign language was forbidden. Lip reading and speaking were the only means of communication allowed. Children were strapped or caned for using sign language. Sign Language was banned from these Deaf schools up until 1989. It wasn't until 1995 that NZ Sign Language was introduced at the Kelston Deaf Education Centre in Auckland and soon after at van Asch Deaf Education Centre in Christchurch. When I asked local Deaf leader and the Chairperson for Deaf Action New Zealand, Kim Robinson, what his thoughts were on the history of Deaf Schools, he said *"The NZ government has failed its duty of care to Deaf children who were entrusted into the care of the State while they attended Deaf Boarding Schools throughout NZ. Many former Deaf Boarding School students are still dealing with a lifetime of psychological scars. The State appointed caretakers used Deaf students as subjects without their consent or families consent. The racism alongside physical, sexual and psychological manipulation that these caretakers used, still affects Deaf people today"* Wow!

This is only one example of potential abuse of disabled people in State care that the Inquiry must hear.

This will be an arduous process, potentially traumatic for the survivors of abuse participating and their whanau. It is, however, important for people to tell their stories so that we as a nation will hopefully not repeat them again. The Inquiry will provide private sessions for survivors to talk to Commissioners involved. Support and counselling will be offered to participants. NZSL Interpreters will of course be available. The people who have tirelessly lobbied Government are over achievers in their own right. New Zealand will look into its dark history to try and ensure these acts of abuse and neglect never happen again.

To get in touch with the Inquiry team you can email contact@abuseincare.org.nz or phone 0800 222 727.

Congratulations and thanks to our over achieving Disabled next generation who are making their mark on the world- keep reaching for the sky!

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

