



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

"A Different Light"

A Different Light –9th December 2023 – “Farewell to 2023, lets reflect on a year that unfolded with challenges and triumphs”

As we bid farewell to 2023, let’s reflect on a year that unfolded with unprecedented challenges, unexpected triumphs, and the resilience that defined our collective journey through a “Different Light” lens.

It started off in February when I was more than slightly worried about the Ruakaka Surf Day that was fast approaching with reports rolling in with fearsome predictions about a new unwelcome menace, Cyclone Gabrielle.

Well, Hallelujah, our Surf Day just squeaked in, pretty much moments before Gabrielle touched down. The waves were robust. The sky was threatening. The rain had started as the last surfers reluctantly came up from the swell.

In March I wrote about a recurring situation that happens in Northland when parents or grandparents reach an age where they can no longer cope with their disabled son or daughter and crisis point is eventually reached. It is not good enough to simply announce there is nothing available. There must be an emergency respite facility available- parents and whanau of disabled people have emergencies including unplanned hospital stays, deaths in the family, floods or other emergencies.

As Mahatma Gandhi once said “The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members”

I made announcements in April that: disability services and Ministry of Health Disability Support (now Whaikaha) funding would be at the same level as ACC. That there is now going to be a 24 percent quota of employees with disabilities in all government agencies. That Kainga Ora (Housing New Zealand) will ensure all new houses they build will be totally accessible. Then I reminded readers it was the 1st of April, April fool’s day.

May was all about the Budget. This year the budget's offerings for the disability sector have been covered widely by media. It means that not only that disability is now news worthy, (not in the usual sense of a "charity case" or an individual overcoming their disability by doing remarkably well despite blah blah), but disability is making headway into the political landscape as a cohort to be reckoned with. (or was that wishful thinking!)

At the half-way mark in June I whinged that to add to the slings and arrows that gout was sending my way, my dear ninety-year-old mother passed away.

As someone with a very visible disability and someone who is unashamedly vain, I have always been very particular about what I wear. On the morning of my mother's funeral, I went to put my shoes on and with horror I realised that there was no way my gout ridden foot was going to fit into my shoe. I sat there looking at my foot which looked like a small piglet on the end of my leg. I couldn't believe that I was going to attend my mother's funeral wearing slippers!

The prevalence of Scams was talked about a lot in July. The NZ Cerebral Palsy Society were being targeted by people pretending to have Cerebral Palsy and joining their organisation. This has forced the organisation ask their members to provide proof of their CP with a medical certificate. Having Cerebral Palsy myself, I have always felt somewhat incredulous when asked to supply proof of having Cerebral Palsy. I mean it's very obvious to everyone when you have Cerebral Palsy. To fake Cerebral Palsy in person would be no mean feat! Although Daniel Day-Lewis did nail an Oscar for Best Actor in his portrayal of Christy Brown an Irish writer and painter who had Cerebral Palsy in the movie "My Left Foot".

August presented an opportunity to fill the sporting void in my life by basking in my whanau's radiant glory of sporting prowess. My niece, Hannah Wilkinson the Football Fern striker made us all collectively roar in adulation as she belted the soccer ball into the back of the net at the opening match of the FIFA Women's World Cup against Norway.

September was busy. Tiaho Trust hosted a meeting with Paula Tesoriero, Chief Executive of Whaikaha, the Ministry of Disabled People, with members of the Whangarei disability community. She wanted to hear about their experiences, expectations and challenges with Whaikaha. She also wanted to highlight the need for building the capability of our community and the need to transform the disability support system. A week later we held our "Meet the Candidates"

event. I had some apprehension and trepidation about the event. I had been reading about various disrupters and agitators who had turned up to various political events up and down the country and caused mayhem. However, everyone was very well behaved. I had hoped the successful candidates would have continued their good behaviour, however this week's protests throughout the motu against the incoming Government's various 100-day announcements suggest otherwise.

As occasional, but dedicated, holiday makers my wife Sally and I, often embark on trips seeking adventure (some), relaxation (lots), and always memorable experiences. In October, we had the opportunity to visit the picturesque Hokianga Heads Hotel, perched at the mouth of the Hokianga Harbour. With high hopes and a confirmed reservation, Sally and I were excited to be going back to one of our favourite getaways. However, what awaited us was a Tale of Unexpected, which was memorable for sure but for all the wrong reasons. After an arduous journey through hail and thunderstorms we found the entire hotel shut down.

In November, we spent a good time of time promoting our celebration of the International Day of People with a Disability. The United Nations always had such a lofty, hazy dazy theme. We at Tiaho have taken a refreshingly grounded approach, if I do say so myself!

We had a fantastic day on the 2nd December. We brought the celebration down to the grassroots level. Instead of getting lost in the abstract, attendees enjoyed a day filled with live music performances and a spectrum of engaging attractions, fostering a tangible sense of community and celebration.

I wish you all a Merry and Diverse Christmas and an Inclusive New Year.

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