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## "A Different Light"

### **A Different Light – 16<sup>th</sup> March 2024 – “Like our Irish cousins, we too rise again with resilience and strength”**

As we gear up for another round of St. Patrick’s Day festivities, I’ve been pondering the connections between Irish culture and the culture of disability. Sounds tenuous? Bear with me a bit longer....

St. Patrick’s Day celebrates the rich heritage of the Irish, from their vibrant music and dance to their enduring resilience in the face of adversity. Similarly, individuals with disabilities navigate a somewhat less than welcoming world, presenting a chocolate box of obstacles and challenges. And just like our Paddy cousins, we too rise again with resilience and strength.

The concept of storytelling is deeply ingrained in Irish tradition. Tales of heroism, triumph, and even mischievous antics are passed down through generations, shaping the cultural identity of the Irish people. Likewise, the disability community have their own stories to tell – narratives of overcoming barriers, challenging stereotypes, and embracing their unique identities.

In Irish culture, community and solidarity are hugely prized. The community comes together in times of joy and sorrow, supporting one another through thick and thin. Well, guess who else do? Whether it's advocating for accessibility rights or fostering a sense of belonging, the bonds of solidarity among individuals with disabilities mirror the tight-knit communities found in Irish villages and neighbourhood’s.

Both the Irish culture and the disability experience seek to celebrate diversity and inclusion. It might be stretching my comparison a little but, hey, just as Irish music encompasses a variety of instruments, rhythms, and styles, one might say that the disability community encompasses a spectrum of identities, abilities, and perspectives. Phew, yeah that might’ve been a stretch.

Okay, how about the symbolism of the shamrock, a quintessential emblem of St. Patrick's Day, With its three leaves representing faith, hope, and love, the shamrock is a potent symbol of resilience and renewal. Yep, I reckon individuals with disabilities embody these qualities as they navigate the complexities of daily life!

And let's not forget the legend of St. Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland. While interpreted metaphorically, this legend speaks to the idea of casting out negativity and embracing positive change. Individuals with disabilities often face societal barriers and prejudices – the figurative snakes in our pathway– yet through advocacy, education, and empowerment, we strive to create a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

Whether you buy my parallels or not, I do enjoy raising a glass of the malt to toast the luck of the Irish! After all, in the grand Riverdance of life, every step forward, back or sideways is a celebration of our shared humanity, disability and Irish culture alike.

Sláinte!

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