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"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 7th December 2024 – “ Celebrating inclusivity at the Santa Parade”

It's that time of year when déjà vu kicks in with a vengeance, as we divide ourselves into two distinct camps: the Christmas Geeks and the Christmas Grinches. The Geeks are those people who seem to emerge from their storage closets covered in tinsel by mid-November, while the Grinches spend December muttering things like “It's just a day,” and “I refuse to listen to *Mariah Carey* one more time.”

First, let's talk about the Christmas Geeks (I must admit I fall partially into this camp). These folks live for the season. They start their gift shopping around September, and buy presents for nearly everyone who comes into their orbit from work colleagues to the rubbish collection crew. They always host Christmas Day at their house and mail out Christmas cards despite the diminishing postal service. Tradition is the Geek's guiding star.

On the other hand, we have the Christmas Grinches—people who view the season with suspicion and disdain, like an unwanted invitation to a glitter-covered cult. To them it's a commercial rout, that manipulates antiquated traditions for mercenary outcomes.

For Grinches, tradition is something to be subverted. Roast turkey? Too dry and too hot for summer, why not opt for a frozen pizza and a store-bought pasta salad? Work Xmas do? They're washing their hair that night. Decorations? Really! Putting them up just to take them down. Secret Santa? They don't need another piece of old tat

Personally, I like hosting Christmas day to the wider whanau. There are certain traditions that I follow zealously. Like forcing my sons-in-law to drink drams of whiskey as we start to prepare, at least two different large roasts of meat. The cooking and preparation are a mammoth effort and so is the clean-up. Last year my wife started a new tradition and forced me to sing a duet of Fairytale in New York by the Pogues in front of her extended family. By the time I came to sing I was feeling a little bit worse for the wear. I remember our audience of extended family looking perplexed and somewhat nervous!

In the aftermath of every Xmas, we vow to break tradition next year and have a small, quiet day, grinch-like. Speaking of breaking traditions, usually Tiaho Trust celebrates the International Day of People with Disabilities (IDPD) by hosting an event with performers on the day. This year we thought we would change things up. One of the goals of celebrating the

IDPD is to hold the event in a public place where the wider community can see us, proudly celebrating the day. This year we decided to see if we could join in the Whangarei Xmas parade organised by Kelly Jelavich of the Whangarei Santa committee. We approached her and she was graciously enthusiastic. She even agreed that Santa Claus would say “Merry Xmas everyone Ho, Ho, Ho!”, in NZ Sign Language. We reached out to see who would like to be involved and we were rewarded by a richly diverse array of participants. There were wheelchair users, there were mobility scooter riders (including moi with my red cowboy style Santa hat with, yes, a flashing light), there were people from the Deaf community and people from Down Syndrome support. We had our local boccia champion Troy, who bought a humungous portable speaker with him and a range of people from neurodiverse backgrounds. I really didn't know what to expect on the day, I arrived mentally and emotionally prepared for the event and open to “what would be would be”. Soon after the parade got in motion, I realised what a big event it was. All of a sudden, we were moving slowly through a corridor of people who were cheering and waving with genuine enthusiasm. Each time we passed through a particularly condensed portion of the crowds the volume of cheers went up! Feeding us with collective positive affirmations that we were part of the wider community and that we were participating and above all else we were valued. What better way to celebrate the International Day of People with Disabilities than to be part of a festival event that embraced the concept of being inclusive. Thanks Kelly and to the Whangarei community – whether Xmas Geeks or Grinches- thank you.

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