



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

"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 9th August 2025 – “Accessible events make all the difference”

The notion of a Mid-Winter Christmas dinner is something of an oxymoron. Winter and Christmas are kind of opposite for us in the southern hemisphere. Maybe the tradition was started by Poms, missing a white snow-laden Christmas in the motherland. Whatever the reason, organisations seem to like the idea of having a good nosh up and pulling a Christmas cracker in the colder months. My wife and I were lucky enough to get invited to the Whangarei Accessible Housing Trust the Mid-Winter Christmas work dinner the other week. It was at the Flames Hotel, so we decided to book a room as it is a fair hike from Waipu to Onerahi.

We asked for an accessible room, but apparently the accessible rooms were flooded out a week ago in the heavy rain, so we were given a room, which to access meant me traveling up and down a flight of nine stairs. Their usual accessible rooms are brilliant, with easy access to the facilities and a great view, but, although the fault of the weather, not the hotel, this wasn't a good start accessibility wise.

The actual dinner, however, was a different story. The Whangarei Accessible Housing Trust and Tiaho Trust are fairly unique in New Zealand, in that we are both disabled-led organisations. This meant that, for this event, disabled people were the majority at the dinner, instead of being the usual minority. The Whangarei Accessible Housing Trust had organised the dinner with that in mind. Instead of having the usual buffet style Xmas dinner, where guests have to tromp up to the banquet tables, to grab a plate and serve themselves, serving dishes of food were brought to individual tables. Similarly, waiters and waitresses took drink orders with mobile eftpos machines. My wife was impressed by this. For years now she has had to endure countless buffets and not only getting her own food but mine as well. She has had to go back to the buffet table to get me seconds and thirds, feeling self-conscious, as she was sure people were watching her accusingly, thinking “how greedy”. The buffet breakfast at the Waitangi Copthorne resort is a buffet she particularly doesn't

look forward to. Having to order multiple poached eggs on my behalf, or standing at the dreaded conveyor like toast maker endlessly appear to rile her. I'm sorry, but I'm in the firm belief that breakfast without toast just isn't breakfast.

The only buffet which has surpassed the Whangarei Accessible Housing Trust mid-winter Xmas dinner were the buffets we encountered on a cruise ship. Here, I could saunter up to the buffet table on my mobility scooter and a cruise ship staff member would appear out of nowhere asking "Can I help you sir?" This delighted my wife who was used to having to use her old waitressing skills and carry two plates in one hand while serving into them. It's well known that cruise ships provide excellent customer services to disabled people. They are also exceptionally accessible. The cruise ship industry provides this offering out of an economic imperative. They know that the older traveller has 50% higher chance of having a disability of one kind or another. They also know that the older traveller has the most disposable income of any other global market segment. It's a business strategy that tourism operators in Northland could well take note of.

Yesterday we held our fabulous "Getting Out There" EXPO at Forum North, with the theme "Accessible Horizons – Experience Inclusion". In the build up to the EXPO we conducted a survey on inclusiveness and accessibility in Northland. Respondents of the survey were able to identify who were the most inclusive and accessible tourist locations, community spaces and businesses. So a drum roll please.... for the winners who were....tourism location category: Huarahi o te Whai Hatea loop; Community Spaces category: Whangarei Library and Business category: Mitre 10 Whangarei. The Inclusive Innovation Award went to Flip Whangarei. Kudos to all these winners who have gone the extra mile to ensure we can all access their offerings- and who knows, maybe Flames will have their fabulous accessible rooms up and running again , to be in contention next year. Until then, festive wishes to all!

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