

Why Communities Need People with Disability

Roz Cooper from Cooran on the Sunshine Coast shares her depth of understanding about the nature of true communities. She says divisive attitudes cannot exist within a context of a true community because true community can only exist when room is made for the differences and limitations of everyone.

In my heart and around our home, my son does not have a disability. When he steps outside the door he becomes disabled. In the context of community his differences are disabling and become life-defining characteristics. An excluding social overlay is imposed upon him where he becomes challenging, has high support needs, requires specialised care and has various other labels applied to describe his differences. He is viewed and related to only in terms of his perceived disability. Rarely if ever is his courage honoured or his true purpose acknowledged. Rarely if ever does society, whose systems presume to know so much about where he belongs and what is good for him, admit that it needs people like my son. Society remains unaware that it does not know this important information.

My son, like others who are similarly labelled, has a highly valuable social role. He is a catalyst for communities to become real. Without people with disabilities 'community life' and 'community spirit' are ideals that can never be achieved and therefore community itself can not exist. While some people remain excluded, the word 'community' will only ever mean a place on the map. There can be no certainty that going to a particular community will be a human or cultural experience.

People with disabilities highlight the exclusivity of communities. Their unacknowledged role is that of reflecting to society and individual communities the fear and prejudice that keeps people separate. Attitudes that are divisive cannot exist within a context of a true community. A community cannot afford alienation of its members. Community can only exist when room is made for the differences, faults and limitations of everyone. A community lives and breathes when it enacts principles of mutual respect, understanding and acceptance.

To stand for inclusive communities means desiring social environments in which all people are included. Communities need people with disabilities because they give us cause to set a new social agenda. Without conscious action on the part of society to embrace all people, communities remain localities starved of their own potential to become a collective of human beings working and celebrating together.

When efforts are made to connect people with disabilities into the heart of their community, opportunities emerge for new and simpler responses to life's needs. Natural relationships begin to form that liberate people with disabilities from the model of service delivery which does not reflect their real needs. Inclusion must occur before full community life can be actualised. Inclusion is not achieved through services or programs that exist on the fringes of communities to provide temporary access to community facilities and activities – they are expensive and deprive the community of resources. Initiatives that weave people with disabilities into the fabric of community life enable a greater sharing of human and financial resources. Such initiatives require that roles and expectations change, that planning is person-centered in community, and that resource expenditure is guided by principles that enrich individual and community life. Inclusive community life is a recognition that people with disabilities are regular people whose needs can be met from within the community.

An openness to recognise each other's needs and a willingness to work together to meet life's needs, are all practices that engage the spirit of community. This spirit becomes apathetic when people with disabilities are subjected to systems designed to make up for their deficits, whenever they are viewed as needy, burdensome or

requiring care that can only be delivered by someone who is an expert or trained for that purpose. Bureaucratic reshaping of lives, segregated services, and funding strategies that combine complex formulas, rigid eligibility criteria and intrusive application processes, all contribute to the distancing of people with disabilities from community life. They reinforce the notion of special-ness that has been used to justify exclusion and has resulted in planning and excessive spending to create a way of life governed by managerialism, competitiveness and waiting-lists. They numb the community spirit, giving it a false sense of security and miss important opportunities.

The pervasive unawareness of the social worth of people who have disabilities can be shifted; new ways forward will become apparent when communities experience their capacity to consider and respond to the needs of all its members. The impetus and skills for making this shift are already present within the community and within people who have disabilities, their families and allies; oppressive forces of isolation, stigma, and ignorance have generated groups who strongly engage values and practices that build strength and cohesion based on values that oppose these forces. Communities that aspire to be real need innovation, communication, determination and cooperation; characteristics that often become a way of life for people who have to deal with injustice. Real communities will eventuate when such skills and resources can be diverted away from the bureaucracy and into a redefinition and renewal of communities.

People with disabilities represent many other people who exist on the fringes of society that challenge communities. Challenge can cause conflict. Conflict results in change. Change is what people with disabilities inspire. Whether we think that the developments which have taken place over the last twenty years are favourable or not, there is no question that at some levels, society has adopted a different response to the lives of people with disabilities. The effectiveness and benefits of changing attitudes are diminished by the persistent perception that people with disabilities are needy. When society realises the gains that come from enacting values of citizenship and inclusion of all people it will discover the integral and necessary role that people with disabilities have played in the evolution of our civilization.