

00:06 Douglas Connor: Hello, and welcome to *Choice and Control*, a podcast celebrating the contribution that people with disability make to our communities. In this series we are talking all things disability, social inclusion, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Throughout this series, you will also be hearing some great practical advice for making the most of your NDIS plan from local people accessing the Scheme. This podcast series is brought to you by Carers Queensland, NDIS Local Area Coordination Partner in the Community. I'm your host Douglas Connor, thank you for tuning in.

Today, I'm lucky enough to be chatting with Lisa Cox. Lisa is a writer, and a passionate advocate for improved representation of people with disability within the media. Lisa is also the Disability Affairs Officer at Media Diversity Australia. Today I talk with Lisa about her work, her passion for inclusive fashion and the importance of disability representation within Australia's mainstream media.

Hello, Lisa, and welcome to Choice and Control.

1:03 Lisa Cox: Thank you very much for having me.

01:05 Douglas: So firstly Lisa I just wanted to ask – as we're chatting today as restrictions for the coronavirus are just starting to ease here in Queensland – how have you found the last couple of months in isolation?

01:16 Lisa: To be honest, I've I really, really loved it. I don't know if I'm the only one, but I've spoken to a few people who for different reasons have enjoyed it. And the reason for that is because I've had my husband home with me and everyone has been making a much more concerted effort to keep the lines of communication open and getting touch, whether that's with a Zoom call or something else. I've written a little bit about this, some of the disability community may relate, and I've certainly had these conversations with people that, many of us have been an isolation for years. So even though so many

around the world are experiencing isolation and not being able to access certain things for a period of time, they were really experiencing that for the first time – for so many of us, that's just our normal.

2:30 Douglas: That's a really interesting perspective, Lisa. You're a very strong advocate for increasing the visibility and representation of people with disability within the media. How did your passion for that topic begin?

2:43 Lisa: Yeah, great question. I suppose the simple answer to that is my background, it's where I spent many years working. I went to university, got two degrees in business communications and media. Then moved to Melbourne where I worked in advertising agencies for several years with national and international brands. Then I acquired all of my disabilities at the age of 24. So that was fun. I spent a year in hospital, a few other things happened. But after that, I suppose I'd spent so many years making my clients, their brands, their products, and messages visible, I realised that I could apply those same principles and strategies to something that was kind of more important than the European cars or the sorts of things I'd been advertising before.

Applying those same techniques, those strategies to disability, that's where the idea of #VisibilityForDisability came about. I really understood the power of a visual image, or even just opening a conversation in the caption or something like that, about disability. And saw a few gaps in the way things are being communicated about disability in the sector.

4:13 Douglas: How are we commonly seeing people with disability represented on our screens?

4:20 Lisa: Yeah, it's not great, to be honest. So first of all, we're rarely seeing them at all. I don't know the exact numbers, but it's pretty damn low considering that disabled people make up, roughly

20 per cent of our population. I'd hazard of guess that it's maybe 1 per cent on the screen. So firstly, we just don't see them at all. Secondly, we're perhaps not seeing them behind the scenes. So on a TV show for example, the writers, the producers, the cameramen, none of them have disabilities either, or may not have disabilities either.

But when we do see them represented on screen or on the ad or something like that, there are misrepresentations and stereotypes coming in. So we might see, for example, the person with the disability being portrayed as the villain. An example of that would be in the James Bond films where the characters with facial deformities are the evil guys. Or we might see them as the stupid guy, the battling idiot, and then butt of jokes and that can be something like Forrest Gump, for example.

The other representations or misrepresentations that we see especially here in Australia are the superheroes. At one end of the spectrum are the superheroes, and they would be maybe the Paralympians, who are really great people by the way and do amazing stuff. So if you're not a Paralympian, then you potentially fall into the other end of the category, which is someone to evoke pity or sympathy. An example of that is if you watch The Voice, any of the seasons really not just this one, but the minute someone with a disability comes onto the screen, cue the sad music for dramatic effect. And that happens quite frequently, whether it's on The Voice or something else, there are these really, really sad stories.

And that's not to say that there aren't absolutely heartbreaking stories in the disability sector, I've certainly seen some of them, but that's certainly not the only way that disabled people live their lives.

6:49 Douglas: And do you think that this lack of portrayal or this misrepresentation of people with disability on our screens, do you

think that has an impact then on the way that people with disability are treated within Australian society?

7:02 Lisa Absolutely, for sure. It's Psychology 101 or Marketing 101 to know that we use things like advertising and media to shape popular culture. Unfortunately the way disability has been portrayed at the moment isn't doing a good job at shaping popular culture. I mentioned before that one of the stereotypes is around pity and sympathy, and seeing that that is unfortunately one of the main stereotypes that we see. And that would probably be why so many people look at me in my wheelchair at the shops doing grocery shopping, and say things like, 'oh, I'm sorry for you, you poor thing', or just look really sad for me. And part of me is frustrated, but I know it's, it's not their fault in some ways because it's what's been said by the media and other parts of the culture for years and years. So it's this ingrained habit in many ways,

8:07 Douglas: The late Stella Young is credited with coining the term 'inspiration porn', referring to a certain depiction of people with disability within the media. Can you explain what that term means and the impact that term can have?

8:20 Lisa: Yeah, sure thing. Stella was awesome. She really was. And if anyone hasn't seen her TED talk about inspiration porn, just type "Stella Young TED talk", or "Stella Young disability porn" into a Google search and you'll find it. Many people with disabilities, including myself, just sit there and nod our heads the whole way through. Her death was certainly a loss to the disability sector. She was a journalist as well, so understood both sides of the coin, as I do.

Disability porn is really the objectification of people with a disability. So the examples she uses in her presentation would be, an amputee at the start of a running race and he's bent over about to run. The headline beside that might play something like 'He's got no excuses. So what's yours?' By itself that's okay, but when those sorts of

messages are repeated, it sort of portrays people's abilities as superheroes and those sorts of things.

I suppose it becomes a problem as well when we're called inspirational just for getting out of bed. As Stella put it in her great presentation, as someone with all sorts of visible and invisible disabilities, it is hard getting out of bed sometimes. But it's again this idea that we're just amazing for existing, when that's all I'm really trying to do is just get on with the day and live a quote-unquote 'normal life'.

I've often used the example that I've been going to the gym for years and years before my disability and then after. Before my disability, not once did someone say 'you're amazing, good on you. You're so brave, great to see you here.' But these days it's something I hear more frequently. That thing, being such an 'inspiration', but all I'm doing is living my life. I'm going to the gym, just like everybody else.

10:34 Douglas: Obviously the media can have a really big role then to play in increasing the visibility of people with a disability on our screens and within society. So from a practical standpoint, what would you like to see journalists and media outlets doing to improve the situation? And then outside of the news cycle, what can be done in the world of advertising or on our film streams, for example?

10:56 Lisa: Well, there is so much that can be done. And speaking as someone who has worked in the sector, worked in advertising, worked in media, it's not rocket science. But I also understand, from the point of view of the non-disabled content creator, which is how I spent the first 24 years of my life, there can be a bit of fear around what to do, how to do it. Do I say this and not offend et cetera, et cetera.

Some really simple examples would be, in a journalistic setting for example, using people with disability to talk about disability issues. So in the Black Lives Matter commentary recently I've seen a lot of

complaints, which is completely justified, about four white people sitting on a panel discussing Black Lives Matter and Indigenous issues. And that's really not on. But by the same token, it's not uncommon to see a number of able-bodied journalists or presenters, discussing the NDIS and other disability issues.

I suppose apart from including people with disability when talking about disability issues, also looking at ways you can use people with disability to talk about non-disability issues. By that I mean, there's far more to me than my disability and my wheelchair and my prosthetics and brain injury and things like that. So if you do have a panel about something like climate change, fashion, politics, the budget, whatever it may be, look at ways you can include people with disabilities in those sorts of conversations as well. Just to help normalise representation so it's not such a big deal for a person with disabilities to also have an interest in things like fashion and politics and budget.

Another example in film and television would be looking at it more holistically. So by that I mean not just putting people disabilities on the screen, but also looking at using them behind the scenes, as well – as the cameraman, as the script writers, as the producers and things like that. I know there's a company down in Sydney called Bus Stop Films who have people with disability producing the content, which is really great to see.

13:36 Douglas: It's really, really cool, some of the stuff they produce.

13:38 Lisa: Yeah, no, it's fantastic. They're the camera operators and things like that. I suppose if you do have a disabled person say, talking about climate change, just talk to them about that. There's really no issue to bring the disability into it. The number of times I've been asked about maybe fashion or something like that, and

suddenly it becomes a conversation about my wheelchair or my prosthetics or my brain injury and it's really got nothing to do with it.

One good way to test is to say, if you wouldn't ask an able-bodied person that, if I wouldn't ask you about your two legs or your 20/20 vision or something like that, then why ask a disabled person the same sorts of question?

14:30 Douglas: So you mentioned fashion there in your last comment, and it's obviously a massive passion for you. How has the Australian fashion industry stacking up in terms of diversity and the inclusion of people with disabilities?

14:44 Lisa: That's a good question and one that's just embarrassing to answer, to be honest. The Australian fashion industry is kind of embarrassing. Disability has been featured on international fashion weeks, Milan, Paris, New York, places like that, for years and years. It's not such a big deal to see a wheelchair going down New York Fashion Week, or someone with prosthetics or something like that. But Australian Fashion Week in Sydney, as diverse as we like to think we are, we have still failed to put one person with disabilities onto the catwalk. Which is really disappointing because we make up 20 per cent of the community, and as I've said before from a business perspective, which is my background, we are consumers. I've said before, I can't walk but I can shop, I have a credit card and it really makes no sense from an ethical and moral point of view, as well as from a business perspective as well.

People with visible disabilities, because they may be invisible disabilities like anxiety or depression or something that we just don't see, but the inclusion of visible disabilities is really important just to help normalise these differences. When we see an accessible bathroom or accessible toilet at the shopping centre, that hasn't got fifty icons with every single imaginable disability, it's just got the one.

It's indicative of disability and things like that, and the need for greater inclusion.

I was really proud last year to be one of the models at Mercedes Benz Fashion Festival here in Brisbane, for the designer Carol Taylor, who's a quadriplegic designer. That was fantastic, little Brisbane – as much as we're the younger sister to places like Sydney and Melbourne – we are really coming ahead and are leaders when it comes to inclusive fashion. Brands like Christina Stevens also coming out of here as well, it's so exciting to see.

17:11 Douglas: That's awesome to see Brisbane taking a bit of a lead in that space. Then if Sydney and Melbourne aren't going to do it, it's great that we are.

17:20 Lisa: Exactly right.

17:24 Douglas: And diversity is seemingly becoming more and more of an important thing for organisations, brands and businesses. Do you think that in 2020 disability is still sometimes being left out of that diversity equation in many cases?

17:38 Lisa: Definitely is. I've written about this before, and I spoke about it just before as well, the fact that we see representation with so many other minorities, but disability is still the least palatable form of diversity. So the piece I wrote for Huffington Post for example, was all about this real push to get People of Colour and women on screens. And that's fantastic, by the way, I'm a proud feminist and want to see plenty more women on screens and plenty more People of Colour, but there's never any discussion about the representation of disability.

In the fashion industry it's very similar. I've been on a red carpet interviewing designers before and each of the designers said to me prior to our conversation, 'Oh, we've got so much diversity'. And I was excited, I couldn't wait to see the collections. But as each came

down the runway, it was all just same, same. There were a few People of Colour, and a few who are maybe a larger size, but that was it. No disability again. So we're definitely being left out of fashion conversation as well.

To my last point, 20 per cent of the population, that's a pretty big market share for marketers to just be ignoring. Representation doesn't have to be rocket science and there are some really simple ways that people with disability can be included. This is not sponsored, but Jockey underwear recently approached me about being one of the models in their campaign. And I flipped through the Instagram feed to make sure that I wasn't the only one token disabled person and I definitely wasn't, which was great to see. Their feed's full of all sorts of diverse bodies, including disability, because so often in the fashion space disability is the one that's left out.

20:02 Douglas: Comparing Australia to internationally then, are other countries moving faster in a direction of inclusion of people with disability in terms of fashion?

20:10 Lisa: Yes they are. Unfortunately places like the US and the UK, it's great, but Australia is still lagging behind. As I mentioned before, wheelchairs and prosthetics and other visible differences have been commonplace at the big international fashion shows for years and years: New York, Milan, Paris, places like that. But Australia is still resisting, and still not representing what I think is the biggest minority.

20:49 Douglas: Hopefully with people like yourself doing the work you're doing that will continue to change and to improve. Lisa, you received support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Can you tell me a little bit about how the support of that scheme helped you live a more full and independent life?

21:06 Lisa: The NDIS for me personally has been a game changer. Unfortunately we only ever hear bad stories in the media, but I have

several friends who have had similar experiences to me and have a lot of positive things to say about the NDIS. Just one example of how I'm getting help these days: I used to take myself to the gym and do certain things and certain exercises. Now I'm not a physio, I'm not trained in that area. I can talk about media and advertising all day, but I'm not much of a medical expert. But now I can get someone who is qualified to help me strengthen muscles I need to strengthen just so I can get up from the couch, really basic stuff to have that greater mobility and greater freedom, essentially. From an outsider's point of view, the NDIS may all be about funding and things like that. But for me personally, it comes down to choice, control and just having a greater quality of life.

22:26 Douglas: That's awesome. I take it that you really missed the gym then over the last couple of months while it's been closed.

22:33 Lisa: I was so miserable. Ask my husband, I was cranky and miserable and yeah, I missed it a lot.

22:42 Douglas: Well, they've just opened back up in Queensland, so hopefully, you can get back.

22:46 Lisa: Woo! I've definitely been back, from 5am the first day it opened I was back.

22:53 Douglas: Well Lisa, that's all I have to ask you today, but thank you so much for taking the time to have a chat with me.

22:58 Lisa: Thank you very much for letting me nerd out on media and disability and representation. It's been really great.

23:11 Douglas: A big thanks again to Lisa Cox for coming on and sharing her knowledge with us. To learn more about Lisa or to read some of her work, which is regularly featured in major Australian and international mastheads and publications, visit her website at lisacox.co. Lisa has written some particularly awesome content and

stories while in COVID-19 isolation, which are particularly worthy of a read.

Thank you once again, for tuning into *Choice and Control*, the Carers Queensland podcast. For more information about Carers Queensland, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, or the Local Area Coordination Program, please connect with us online at carersqld.com.au. Or you can catch up with us on Facebook at facebook.com/CarersQueenslandNDIS. We hope this podcast can become a place for people with disability to share their experiences and their stories, so if you have a story that you think we should know about please contact us via the Carers Queensland enquiries line at 1300 999 636 or via email cq.enquiries@ndis.gov.au.

Until next time, thanks for listening.