

renegade

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# COLLECTIVE

ISSUE 10

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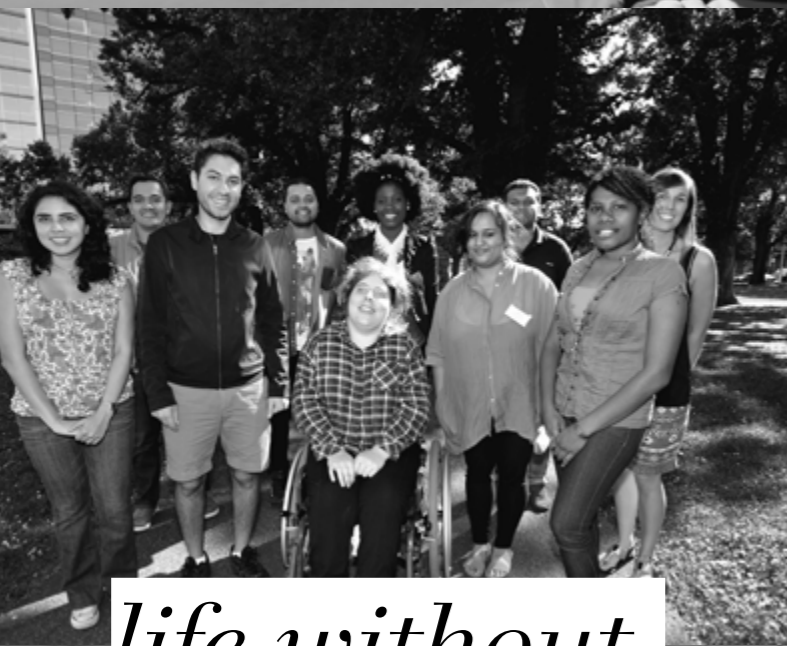
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# life without LIMITS

WHETHER IT'S *helping disadvantaged people to CONNECT OVERSEAS* or *negotiating with GOVERNMENTS* and other agencies for a **MORE INCLUSIVE world**, disability rights CAMPAIGNER *Erin Gough* is **LIVING PROOF** that limitations are ALL IN THE MIND.

WORDS: LEAH DAVIES

**S**he navigates the world sitting. Traversing the terrain from her wheelchair. But from her perspective, the view is vast and limitless. The margins are wide and the obstacles act only to fuel her desire to radically demystify all that's been misinformed, misunderstood and misinterpreted.

This is Erin Gough, leading disability rights advocate and lawyer-in-training who hails from Christchurch, New Zealand. At the age of two, Erin was diagnosed with spastic diplegic cerebral palsy, a condition that means her legs don't function like those of others because of damage to her brain either just before or after birth.

Erin explains, "My eyes are also affected a bit. My right eye turns out slightly and I also have really shoddy co-ordination, so I startle easily, which is embarrassing sometimes but it's always a good opportunity for a laugh!"

When she's not creating spaces for young people living with a disability to connect internationally, Erin is entering negotiations with the New Zealand government and councils to rebuild an accessible Christchurch following the 2011 earthquake. And when she's doing neither of these, she's lobbying to educate people about the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities or encouraging her peers to make volunteering part of their lifestyle.

Asked, "What's it like?" countless times by friends, strangers and colleagues, Erin responds, "That's very difficult for me to answer. I really don't know any different. That's like me asking what's it like to have freckles or what's it like to be tall."

Erin's impairment has not dulled or made her life any less extraordinary, and says she won't allow it to, either. Now aged 22, she does not deny that being disabled is definitely a huge part of her identity, but makes it clear that it certainly does not define who she is and what she does.

"To me, using a wheelchair is the most convenient way of getting around, just as walking is to most people – nothing more, nothing less. To me, my impairment is simply one of many characteristics that make me unique, just as everyone else has features that make them different from everyone else."

In fact, Erin says her condition has been the antidote to indifference. "It has made me determined, tenacious and keen to challenge stereotypes and expectations. It has taught me how to think creatively because of the barriers I



have to get around every day and has generally given me a distinctive view of the world."

Ardently vocal and passionate about the topic of disability, Erin says there's a general assumption in all societies and cultures that living with a physical disability is a negative experience; that it's somewhat of a disadvantage or hindrance.

"This is what needs to change. This type of thinking. It's small thinking. It's not open, inclusive or dynamic. Disability is not something one overcomes. It's simply something one lives with and experiences, and everyone, disabled or not, has limitations... I and everyone who identifies as disabled are so much more than that label."

"I am a New Zealander. I am a female. I am a sister. I am a daughter. I am a friend. I am a university student. I am an advocate. I am all those things as much as I am a disabled person," she says.

"It's not our bodies that have restricted us. People are instead disabled by the fact that they're excluded from participation in mainstream society because of the physical, institutional and attitudinal barriers that exist and continue to exist."

The earthquake that hit Christchurch during February 2011 and the developments since are a testament to this. Erin was at home by herself when the ground violently shook.

"Finding shelter under a table or doorframe was not an option for me. All I could do was sit, put my brakes on, and wait for it to stop, hoping that I didn't fall out and that nothing would fall on me," she reflects.

"It did stop and I wasn't injured. I was amazingly lucky. Our city and so many others, though, were not so fortunate. Till this day, parts of Christchurch remain largely in shambles."

Erin comments that Christchurch was a largely inaccessible city and while the tragedy had a severe impact on almost everyone, it's an opportunity to rebuild the city's infrastructure in a better way.

Through Oxfam, the worldwide development organisation that mobilises people against poverty and injustice, Erin is part of the youth leadership network Oxfam International Youth Partnerships (OIYP).

In 2012, she teamed with another youth leader from within the program, Zara Todd from England, to develop a project intended to shift paradigms and allow disabled youth the right to influence discussion and decisions made on their behalf, often by people not living with a disability. They applied for funding from OIYP and were successful, kick-starting their dream instantly.

And for the duo, they say INDYSpace, a budding idea designed to give young disabled people a voice at the international level, is where the power of collective action

has really come to life. It's an online hub for 16- to 30-year-olds to share, learn and exchange stories and to date, more than 2000 people have signed up.

As she puts it, "It's an opportunity for people to learn and network, which will lead to an increased presence of disabled young change-makers on a global level. It's also an opportunity to shine a light on those already making change in their communities and to encourage and inspire those who want to make change, but aren't sure how."

Forging a global youth disability network hasn't come without a hefty dose of setbacks, technical and tactical issues, and a hint of reservation.

"To be honest, Zara and I didn't anticipate how massive

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the task really was, and living on opposite sides of the world to one another doesn't help. We've had to do everything via Skype. It has also been a challenge to make the information available to disabled young people in countries that don't generally have internet access; those who in fact need this space more than anyone. I think if we were to do it again, we would definitely start things on a smaller, more manageable scale," she concedes.

"It's been a profound experience regardless and we have both undoubtedly learned a lot. I can't believe we actually made this happen, from an idea initially born in the courtyard of a hotel in India four years ago! Learning doesn't come without trial and when you stop learning, you stop living," says Erin, adding that the next step is launching webinars for real-time audio and visual connection and translation of the site into multiple languages.

"So, what's it like?" Erin returns to the original question.

"Being disabled is like every other experience as a human being in this world – sometimes it's challenging, sometimes rewarding, sometimes frustrating, sometimes amusing, sometimes depressing, sometimes liberating – and forever changing."

"I have many of the same desires as other people. I want to be a change-maker. I want to be a lawyer. I want to travel the world. I want to be successful and happy. Perhaps most of all, like every other person, I want to be respected in who I am, in what I do and in the way I choose to live my life." ■