

Edited Transcript

Universal Design Conference

Sydney Town Hall (Lower)

Wednesday, 20 August 2014 at 9am

Day 1

About This Document

This edited transcript has been taken directly from the text of live captioning provided by The Captioning Studio and, as such, it may contain errors.

The Captioning Studio accepts no liability for any event or action resulting from the draft transcript provided for this edited version.

COTA NSW accepts no liability for any event or action resulting from this edited transcript provided for the benefit of conference delegates. Only those presentations made in the Lower Town Hall are provided. There was no captioning available for the concurrent sessions held in an upstairs room.

The original draft transcript must not be published without The Captioning Studio's written permission.

CHILDREN

Session Chair: Sharon Fingland

Bec Ho and Justine Perkins: Fair Play - inclusion begins in the playground

***Synopsis:** Including children with a disability in outdoor play is possible with some careful design planning. All children benefit from learning through play and using outdoor activities to socialise and interact with each other regardless of their level of capability.*

BEC HO: We run a national charity called Touched by Olivia and today we want to share some stories with you. We have some colleagues following up after us who are going to focus more on the academic rigour and the practice. So we thought we'd leave that with them and we'd give a bit of heart.

So we're in a country where there are hundreds of thousands of charities. It's important that we're able to distinguish our cause from all the other charities and break out. At Touched by Olivia we believe in a simple mission, inclusion through play, and we believe that children will learn to accept each other and their differences when they're given the chance to socialise on a level playing field. We partner with the communities, corporations and local governments to build inclusive play spaces, but why do we do this?

JUSTINE PERKINS: Our story begins in 2006, the year my baby daughter Olivia died. She was my second child, a little sister to her big brother Will. I don't think anything can prepare someone for the death of their own child. We were completely heart broken when Olivia's condition, a very rare condition called lymphatic malformation, was explained to us. To be faced with the prospect that Olivia would require a lifetime of medical intervention and intensive therapy was well beyond belief. However, never did we feel that we wouldn't bring Olivia home with us. Three weeks after admitting Olivia into hospital, she died. She was eight months old.

Within a month of her death, we established the Touched by Olivia Foundation. We couldn't accept that a little life could come in this world and leave without a drastic shift in the way we lived our own lives. We did some research and we drew on our experience as parents and we found some very hard and horrifying facts. 24% of Australian children who are obese. I'll just let you read the rest of the stats, that you may want to jot down or look at later in the presentation.

Fast forward seven years, nearly eight years, we're going from strength to strength and we're building our national network of Livvi's places. They're inclusive play spaces and we're living by the mantra "inclusion through play".

BEC HO: So all of our playgrounds are known to be part of the Livvi's Place National Network and our goal is that every community in Australia with a need will have a Livvi's Place that can be on our map one day in our office. We just opened our 10th playground and we have another 30 in development across Australia, which I think is a real testament to Justine's vision.

But what makes an inclusive play space to us? A couple of years ago we got some federal funding and were able to bring some of the best practitioners in inclusive play design, so some people in this room today were able to share with us their knowledge and experience and we came up with six really basic principles

of what makes a playground inclusive and it's fundamentally based on the universal design principles. We just simplified it even more. Everyone can play, there's access to nature, the total experience - things we were talking about, like that crazy ramp before, making sure that the solutions are simplified; a connection to community, that consultation and engagement process that a lot of the other speakers are talking about; play independence, allowing people to do it themselves; and friendship - the most important thing to us is the invitation and acceptance and inclusion. So today we're going to tell some stories of some of our favourite friends, so bear with us.

JUSTINE PERKINS: So now we've been up and running and we've sort of proven that our model works, we've had the beautiful opportunity to meet with some families who have been touched by our vision. First up we'd like you to meet BJ. BJ is 18 years old and he's an adventurer. He was diagnosed with cerebral palsy and now gets around in a wheelchair. His mum, Julie, was a travel agent by trade, so she started a blog called "Have wheelchair will travel" so she could share some of her travelling tips with others.

Now, although Julie's world came crashing down upon BJ's diagnosis, her expectations didn't change. It was her right, she felt, to take her child to a park like every other family would. But of course, as we all can appreciate, socialising with a child with a disability can be very, very difficult. I'd just like to read you in Julie's words what her experience with us has been:

Always positive, we figured we'd find a way around what we call tricky situations. Going to the park when our son was little was managed by sitting him on our lap to swing, carrying him up to the slide and getting him involved as much as possible. As he grew, getting up the slide became more difficult and there was less he could do at the park.

By this stage, we had our daughter. Despite her being of an ideal age for the park, it became a place I hated because it was an environment that highlighted our son's disability. We always believed in living life positively and it was hard to do that at the park. Our son had become an observer rather than a participant and we didn't like that.

We avoided playgrounds for many years. We then read about Livvi's Place and decided to venture to the park again. We had visited parks that had been deemed all-abilities, but we didn't find there was much to do if you were using a wheelchair. We were blown away by Livvi's Place at Tembrell. The ideas incorporated into the park were inciteful and well thought out. So many families were enjoying the park, seemingly oblivious to exactly how fabulous the park was for anyone with special needs.

I felt like telling them, but it occurred to me not only would they think me loopy, but how wonderful it was that they just saw the park as a fun, normal park. We quietly revelled in the fact that it was so inclusive and we're delighted that things are changing.

Our son rode the merry-go-round in his wheelchair and enjoyed being surrounded

by other kids. He waited with anticipation and excitement as the timer counted down to go. He enjoyed the musical bells on the ground and many of the other features of the park.

Spurred on by our successful visit to Tembrell, we decided to go to the other Livvi's Place nearby at Yamble Reserve in Ryde. The park is close to the Cerebral Palsy Alliance, where we had spent many years doing therapy. How I wish this was there years ago as a treat at the end of therapy or as a meeting place for our CP Alliance mothers group. How wonderful that parents can now have this place to explore and enjoy.

At Livvi's Place our son did something he'd never been able to do before, he whizzed down on a flying fox. You cannot imagine the grin or the squeal of delight as he whizzed across in the flying fox seat with his sister enjoying the experience on the flying fox on the other side. There is so much to learn from play and from playing side by side with your peers no matter their ability.

BEC HO: So we're moving on to our second story, and it's a little boy who has a really close place in my heart, Luke. In 2011 Justine's husband, John, was featured on an SBS TV show called "Behind the Front Door" and we got a lot of publicity across the country. One of the emails we received is up on the screen now from a family in Wollongong, Sean and Rita Rapley, who had two children, Ella and Luke. Luke has a number of neurological issues and multiple challenges when going out into public places, so they were really excited by the idea of having a Livvi's Place in their community. This is their family story. (Video played):

My name is Sean Rapley and I'm the driver for Luke's Place, Illawarra. Luke is my son, he's four years old. Luke has special needs, he has neurological disorder and multiple challenges. He has no awareness of danger or spatial awareness, so he'll just take off at any time. So it's quite dangerous to go to a normal play space.

Luke's Place is a space where he's safe to play and roam about. It will have equipment in it where he can play together side by side with his sister and other kids and hopefully make friends and build relationships as he gets older.

ELLA: When I find friends, he wants to play and join, but can't really join in. It makes me feel a bit upset because I really feel like crying sometimes when he gets upset that he doesn't get anyone to play with. Yeah, it was a good idea to do this park. We will be able to play together to get people to know him more and he'll be able to get more friends. I think it will make him very happy.

BEC HO: So over \$300,000 was raised over a period of about two years to make the Rapleys' dream a reality, and in March this year we joined Luke and hundreds of residents to open Luke's Place. There are thousands of people in the Illawarra living with a disability and they now have a fun and safe place that they can go and enjoy. And as a nice throwback, BJ dropped in and had a little visit earlier this month.

This is another one of my little friends, Sarah. Sarah is eight years old and she has a rare condition known

as Pallister-Killian syndrome. She is one of only a dozen cases in Australia. She's unable to communicate and she needs someone to feed, shower and help her toilet. Sarah and her little sister Hannah in the picture together, the problem with them being able to play is that they need to drive an hour out of time where they live in Ballarat to find somewhere that they can play together. Like BJ, Sarah is often on the outside and unable to enjoy the playground with her sister.

That is being rectified at the moment because her family passionately believe in the benefits of inclusion and they're driving a project in Ballarat, Livvi's Place Ballarat, which was in fact designed by Jeavons, by Mary and the team. It's exciting because they've undertaken a really extensive consultation period with people with disability, the indigenous community - everyone has been asked what they want to see in this playground, and we have fantastic things, like an accessible family room inside the fence line of the playground. We have a fence line, so that is something often families with children of autism ask us for. They need it or they won't even go to the playground.

We have adult-length change tables in the accessible family room. We have sandpits and water play that is at a level where somebody with a wheelchair can get in and have a play too. There are sensory spaces, imaginative places - every aspect includes everyone. This is a picture of Sarah and Hannah enjoying a Livvi's Place earlier last year at the opening of our first Victorian playground. As you can see, she's in the middle having fun.

JUSTINE PERKINS: So you've had some really beautiful, heart-warming stories, but it's not all ice cream and lollipops in the playground sometimes. We might be able to build these beautiful spaces, and I know I'm preaching to the converted here, everyone is on board, but it also starts at home. We do need people to be educated on how to integrate these play spaces into everyday life.

We recently stumbled across a letter that had been posted up at one of our play spaces by a mother who didn't identify herself, but I commend her for her bravery. I'll just quickly read a little bit of it. It's titled "This Park is for Everybody": "It is wonderful that so many different people come to this park to enjoy the marvellous facilities and it's fenced. Whole families, parties, single parents with children connecting with others and a real sense of community and belonging." This mother has a son who has autism. He's four years old. "He spends a lot of his time in therapy, he spends a lot of his time being told what to do. He loves coming to Livvi's Place because he's free to play, and he plays not the way that most children would play in the park, but he plays in his own very freestyle way."

She goes on to say, "I'm disgusted that my son, who is minding his own business playing by himself, is approached by another child, younger or older, is chastised or even kicked and hit repeatedly for the way he's playing. The parents often just watch without reprimand. It breaks my heart. I would rather be at home, but it is my son's right to access the community and learn to live within it, especially as this is what will be expected of him as he grows. It's a long and tireless and thankless journey, but I'm brought to new levels of grief when a child half my son's age comes halfway across the park just to give my son an earful and a beating."

She does then go on to thank the beautiful sweet children and their families for interacting with her child, and she will continue to come to Livvi's Place in the hope that people and their level of education and awareness continue to be heightened.

BEC HO: So why we sort of felt like we'd failed that family and not achieved our goal, we've also got things in place - when you build a space, you have to build the programs behind it, you have to build the community, you have to do those sorts of things. We've been working really hard and we were very excited last month to build our first social enterprise cafe. Mothers like the one who wrote the letter will have a place where she's invited and connected with her community. We have happy hour programs, mothers groups, story times where we'll read our little story book that we just had published as well, talking about inclusion, we take this book around schools and read it to kids without disabilities to try to share what we're trying to do. We're also employing people with disability in our cafes, so we've set up an employment model, we hope to roll that out in all playgrounds going forward. We're trying to include everyone. There are a lot of people here who work in the aged care industry, we're big on intergenerational play. As you can see in here, we have a number of older visitors to the playground. Our lucky last.

JUSTINE PERKINS: Our final story - I know we're really tight on time - it's my other daughter, Gabrielle. She's a very special soul. She was born five months after Olivia died and she's one of Olivia's biggest fans. I'm proud of my daughter, proud of the empathy she feels and her awareness of the differences that exist and challenges that many families face on a day-to-day basis. In Gabrielle's words - often we forget to ask the children what they think - this is how she portrayed her understanding of the foundation. My name is Gabriel Perkins and I am going to tell you about Touched by Olivia. It's a story about a little girl dies 8 months after she was born from a disease. I have three brothers, one called Isaac, one called Will and one named Henry. They remind me of the stuff that Olivia would do with me. She would play games. Touched by Olivia is a charity for people with disabilities. We make playgrounds so people with disabilities can still play games. I think that Touched by Olivia should make playgrounds all around the world so we can show people that we want people with disabilities to live a proper life. If my sister was still alive she would have had a disability, she would have had to go to hospital a lot.

BEC HO: We've shared five different stories and five very different families, a fair and also not so fair play and the work we're trying to do to level the playing field even more, but the journey is far from over for us and for you guys and we need help. We need people to work with us, we need to get out to the community. Obviously everyone in this room is a champion, but our work is far from done.

JUSTINE PERKINS: We don't want to be exceptional. In fact, we want to be redundant. We want inclusive play to be the norm. So with your help I'm sure we can achieve that sooner rather than later. We thank you for all your support and we look forward to informing, inspiring and including together. (Applause)

SHARON FINGLAND: Thank you very much for that really inspiring presentation. I think we've got time for one or two questions.

DELEGATE: I'm interested to know how do you get the funding to get one of the Livvi's playgrounds started?

JUSTINE PERKINS: We used to do a lot of fundraising, but we found the fundraising took all our time and we couldn't execute, so that's why we're collaborative, we like to work with corporates. We have beautiful national partnerships now in place with the likes of Leightons, Stockland, a lot of big construction programs, we work with Councils. We ask the council usually where the site exists comes to the party and puts a fair bit of funding in. The community drivers might do their own fundraising activities. So everyone gets

involved. It's really a collaboration and partnership.

DELEGATE: I'm interested in the social enterprise model that you talked about. Can you elaborate a little bit on that model and how that's coming together?

JUSTINE PERKINS: Sure. We're so excited about it. The first one opened in only July. It's annexed to the playground, our first playground we opened. So we have outsourced the running of the cafe, because we can't do cafes, it's not really our bread and butter. But we're working with a recruitment agency. They will help place a person with a disability within that cafe and it's really a workplace training transition to work program. Does that answer your question?