

Columnist

Mik Scarlet



To See Yourself As Others See You

I have been disabled since birth, but for the 47 years I have been on the planet the way the world thinks about me has overwhelmingly been coloured by emotions of pity. "It's such a shame what happened to you" or "You poor thing" are the kind of comments that peppered my childhood, and shaped the way I wanted to be seen by the world. I fought against this impression that my existence was in some way tragic, and during my adult life I thought I had become someone that contradicted this attitude in such a dramatic way that just meeting me would make people question their beliefs around disability. I am a confident, happy, creative person who has a life that most people would be envious of, disabled or not. It's not just me, I know loads of disabled people who live such lives, and I really thought that as these people grew in number society's attitudes towards disability would change. Yet recently I found myself confronted by the fact that this might not be the case.

The first occurrence was at a friend's birthday party. Someone had tried hitting on my wife while she waited to visit the bathroom. Obviously interested as to why she had rebuffed him, the guy came in search of the husband he had been told so much about. Much to the surprise of this person, who obviously had good taste in women as my wife is definitely worth chatting up, he had been turned down in favour of someone in a wheelchair. The surprise was pretty obvious from his face. His opening question to me revolved around the old "what happened?" line and was quickly followed by how sad it was that I was in a chair. I replied with my standard explanation of my journey to wheelidom, "blah, blah, cancer, blah, blah, spinal injury, blah, blah, best thing ever happened, blah,

blah, TV presenter and musician, blah, blah, happily married, living a life that most people could only dream of" as Diane and myself laughed with each other and cuddled to indicate just how happy we were, but we both could tell that whatever we said was not being believed. It was clearly beyond my wife's potential suitor that anyone disabled could be happy with their lot. Now at this point I feel I should point out that this male person was dressed, rather unconvincingly, as a woman. (Yes I do go to some strange parties!) So as he tottered away on his rather large high heels, I was left feeling very let down. Surely someone who felt the need to dress as the opposite sex should be able to understand that someone can be happy living outside of society's norms? I would have thought that being a transvestite might have just as many drawbacks as using a wheelchair, even if you can take the dress off at the end of the night. At the very least, I would have imagined that living an alternative lifestyle gave you the ability to see that people don't have to conform to society's stereotypes. In this case it appears I am wrong.

GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY WE CAN ACHIEVE ANYTHING AND BE WHATEVER WE DREAM OF BEING

Then, while recovering after a very riotous NYE party, I was chatting with one of my closest friends about politics. She's always been a bit of a Tory girl, and as I am a rabid lefty we always enjoy our heated discussions. Lately she has moved slightly to the left, which just shows that this government is losing its core voters (tee hee - lefty laugh), so when we started

chatting about the current changes in disability welfare benefits I hoped she would agree with me that they are targeting those who the system was designed to help, but she was adamant that any changes were only aimed at those people committing fraud, and that no one would ever target people struck by the tragedy of real disability. Now I won't bore you with the rest of the conversation as I horrified her with the truth behind how these changes are impacting the lives of disabled people, as I am sure you all have personal experiences of them, but it did shock me that even someone who has been one of my best mates for over ten years still thinks about disability as a tragedy.

Please don't get me wrong, I understand that many of you might be in a place where your disability is affecting your life in a negative way. In fact, the way society still isn't built to allow full access to equal opportunities for disabled people affects all of us to our detriment. It isn't the disability itself that is the tragedy, it's all the rubbish that goes with it. I regularly run teaching sessions with school kids where I explain the Social Model of Disability and to see the overjoyed reaction of disabled children to the idea that it's the fault of the world around them that they have problems, and not their own disabilities, is a wonderful thing to behold.

Given the opportunity we can achieve anything and be whatever we dream of being, play a highly constructive role in society and live fulfilling happy lives. Making society understand this won't just help disabled people, but everyone.

So all together now... "Shout long, shout loud, we're Disabled and Proud.... and very happy to be so!" ■