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36 EMBRACING DIFFERENCE

We are often too quick to judge others and forget to accept people for who they are. Differences are what make the world such a fascinating place to live in and life so interesting. I recall an interview with a 'ninety-seven-year-young' person who had been married to his wife for some seventy-one years. The interviewer asked him if the fact that they had the same interests and were similar to each other made for a good marriage.

He laughed and said 'No'. In fact, the opposite was true. What he loved most about his wife was her imperfections and differences. It would be extremely boring if we were just the same; no disagreements, no debate, and no discussions on issues.

'She votes differently to me. She has a very different way of doing things. Most things she does are different to me; it is these differences that have made our marriage a success. I value her

opinion even if I disagree with it.' When we travel, most of us often marvel at the different aspects of the other country's culture – making our trip so memorable.

Yet, when many people return home, they quickly fall into the trap of criticising people who disagree with their way of thinking and way of life.

Only a foolish person does not endeavour to understand and embrace human diversity. I

first worked with people with disabilities some 15 years ago. One of my initial tasks was to support a person with a disability, David, by finding him paid employment.

David had an intellectual disability and I had assumed (remember to 'ASSUME' makes an ASS out of U and ME) that he would take longer to grasp the nature of his tasks than someone without an intellectual disability. I was to be constantly proved wrong.

David's employer was later nominated by my organisation (Spectrum) for the Australian Prime Minister's Award – Employer of the Year. The company was successful in the application, and with great excitement Spectrum prepared both the employer and David to fly to the national capital, where they were to be presented with the award by the then Prime Minister of Australia, Mr Paul Keating.

I gave David a suit I had grown out of, and we packed them up and headed to Canberra to meet the Prime Minister – a truly exciting time for all of us at Spectrum (what an understatement!) and the employer concerned. What we had underestimated was how excited Dave was about heading off to meet the Prime Minister. He had never been on a plane, never been to

Canberra and had never worn a suit. (I couldn't blame him for the suit thingy though!)

The employer (Steve) took an extra three days off, and Dave and Steve headed for the sights and sounds of Canberra, experiencing everything the nation's capital had to offer. They sampled it all – fine dining, The Australian War Memorial, Parliament House, The Australian Mint, as well as the fascinating art and science museums.

When the time came for the presentation we all assembled in the Great Hall within Parliament House to await a three-course luncheon and the commencement of Mr Keating's address.

As David's and Steve's names were called, I watched with pride as Dave strode towards the Prime Minister and spent what seemed like ten minutes, quizzing the PM on a range of issues. When the official photograph was taken, there was Dave with his arm around the Prime Minister of Australia!

But the most amazing feat was to occur when Dave returned home. He visited my office every day after his day at work and spent, on average, an hour each day over the next week at my office advising me of every detail of Paul Keating's trip to Asia. He discussed who he was seeing, where he was each day, and who he came in contact with.



Any political journalist would have been proud to have Dave on his/her team.

We thought we had found a new career path for Dave as the Labor Party's new campaign manager. I had been truly impressed with the detail and work Dave had done researching and relaying his story to me each afternoon.

I never assumed anything about David's abilities ever again. We all learned to benefit from his obsession with movies and actors. No Spectrum staff member would spend money going to the cinema without consulting with the best film critic we had ever encountered.

The lessons Dave taught us all were: embrace difference, never assume anything, and listen as every person has a contribution to make within the community. Our branding was soon to become Spectrum – 'Connecting the Community'. Embracing diversity and difference allows us to look at and examine other ways of addressing various situations and problems.

At Spectrum, we developed a policy in meetings to encourage every staff member to say whatever he/she wanted to say, no matter how crazy it seemed at the time. Our strategy was to prove enormously successful. Brilliant ideas were discussed, considered and many were supported.

Over the years, it saw the organisation expand to include a fitness centre, training complex and a counselling service for people with disabilities and the general public. These combined activities bred a range of whacky ideas that raised in excess of one million dollars, paying for the entire current infrastructure of Spectrum.

This organisation continues to operate as a not-for-profit community business. Every year it assists over 300 people with disabilities to live fully-integrated lives within their community.

*I've learned that people will forget
what you said, people will forget what
you did, but people will never forget
how you made them feel.*

Maya Angelou

*We all should know that diversity
makes for a rich tapestry, and we must
understand that all the threads of the
tapestry are equal in value no matter
what their colour.*

Maya Angelou