

Conference towards social integration, rights, roles, recognition of persons with disabilities

A disabled person's view point

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AT a time when all seems to be centred on other areas, is it fair to say that persons with disabilities are treated with repugnance or respect, today, in Trinidad and Tobago?

Recently, a conference was held at the University of the West Indies and was attended by a young, disabled woman by the name of Charlene Forde.

Charlene was the victim of two vehicular accidents and is now confined to a wheelchair. I found it prudent to interview her about the benefits she would have attained from the conference which to her is very important for the development of the disabled community.

This is her view:

Arrival:

On my arrival, I was greeted by a friendly and courteous volunteer. I was escorted to the registration area and then taken to the conference area. There were some challenges at first, but Ms. Jacqueline Huggins, Coordinator of UWI St Augustine Academic Support/Disabilities Liaison Unit and Dr. Innette Cambridge, Lecturer and Coordinator Social Policy Programme (both committee members of Nodes), made the process smooth and from then forth. The conference experience was informative and motivating together with creating an environment for networking.

The organisers made all necessary arrangements to ensure that not only myself but other persons with disabilities were able to attend.

Programmes were excellently structured, giving detail about the topics and the presenters.

Volunteers:

I felt compassion for the volunteers, because there were those who really went out of their way to ensure that you were well taken care of and comfortable.

Special shout out to two volunteers Shermaine Belgrave Ramdial and Bridgemohan Harry.

The forum presentations:

The information was very informative but too intense since I was unable to consume all at the same time.

Another positive aspect of the conference experience was the networking with persons locally, regionally and other parts of the world. Learning their various cultures and how they meet the demands and treat persons with disabilities, their challenges and their processes to overcome some of those challenges.

Yet still, the roundtable discussions were very informative. However, a recommendation for future conferences, is the consideration for the provision of transportation for the differently community. Many more differently-abled persons may have been willing to attend but were unable to accomplish this goal.

Indeed, (lack of) transportation is a major issue that limits inclusion in the wider society.

There were two book launches by Dr. Annicia Gayle-Geddes, - *Disability and Inequity: Socioeconomic Imperatives and Public Policy in Jamaica*. I was sorry that I was unable to purchase one for myself.

Professor Elizabeth Harry, University of Miami:

USA Integration is a two-way street. The power of reciprocity - Her story of her daughter who had a disability, to me was mesmerising, to the point that I got the book as a gift, from one of the participants as I expressed that the photo of her daughter and the story reached out to me.

There were short films on issues of disabilities. The conference was challenging at times, but it was mostly edifying. I believe that the organisers of this event should be highly commended.

Deaf community:

It seemed that persons from the Deaf community, were well-represented. They enjoyed the conference experience and felt it rewarding, as it was able to educate people more about the Deaf and Deaf Culture.

A highlight of the conference was the use of both hearing and deaf sign language interpreters. However, it was expressed there should have been deaf presenters doing a presentation of deaf culture and language.

World Bodies - Foreign Partners:

I met two very inspiring persons, one of whom was Mr. Sylvester Clarke of the Bajan Stars, Dyslexia Support Group in Barbados. He was one of the non-Trinidadian participants, during our conversations, he expressed that a good thing about the conference was that more persons were aware of persons with disabilities and what they can accomplish.

For him, one of the highlights of the conference was Eileen Dunne, one of the keynote speakers who had Down's Syndrome. However, for him, the conference could have highlighted a wider range of learning disabilities including dyslexia.

He also felt that sometimes the language of the conference was too academic and could have been communicated in a way that the average person could understand.

For persons with mental disorders, the conference helped to put the spotlight on mental disorders as a hidden disability.

Having both, Dr. Gerald Hutchinson, Professor of Psychiatry as a keynote speaker and a roundtable that included a person with bipolar disorder describing her personal experiences, meant that mental disorders were finally given some of the attention it deserves.

Disability Gender and Violence:

Presenter from England, speaking on the physiological and sexual aspects and challenges faced by persons with disabilities, and women in general were essential topics in understanding the double challenges that disable girls and women face on daily basis - being differently-abled and being female.

Autism:

The 23-year-old speaker, Johann, has autism and was able to articulate and explain his emotions, feelings and challenges, within the school system and about other topics of interest.

His love for reading was endearing. Elizabeth Harry and Selris James and his Artistry Mastery of Depth and Perspective - This young man was able to express his feelings and emotions through paintings and it was narrated by Professor Elizabeth Harry. This presentation was very impressive.

Areas to look at for future reference:

- Transportation as a topic of interest, since there was no mention on the challenges persons with disabilities and their families face almost daily.

- The physical environment for persons with disabilities and the challenges faced especially by those who are wheelchair users.

- The information was too intense, and I was unable to consume all at the same time. I would suggest that UWI look at having modules throughout the year, highlighting specific topics, in small doses so that retaining would be easier.

Conclusion:

Persons I interacted with have expressed excitement for follow-up and future events of this nature.

At the end all participants were given an even greater treat, as they were privileged to meet Their Excellences Mr. Anthony Thomas Aquinas Carmona, SC and Mrs. Reema Carmona, The First Lady whom both expressed their interest and desire towards creating avenues for change for persons with disabilities."