

advisory group for disabled and aged

A monthly series
for seniors by Ruth
Gerzon from Eastern
Bay Villages.



grey matters by Ruth Gerzon

Like many older people, I fear a loss of mind or bodily function as I get older, knowing that some form of impairment becomes more likely as I age.

The reality is that 60 percent of people over 65 have a disability. If not a permanent state, injuries in ageing bodies take a frustratingly long time to heal.

There are guides in the journey that may await us. Many people in our communities have lived with impairment, intellectual or physical, since birth. They have learned to adapt and still live good lives in spite of the double whammy of both their impairment and the discrimination they face.

A word or two on language is needed here. Impairment means the actual physical or intellectual loss or damage. Disability refers to not just that, but also to the many barriers society creates that disable people with impairments.

Often those barriers have a greater negative effect than the impairments themselves. The lack of accessibility, discrimination by employers, the impatience of people who do not give others time to communicate, all these contribute to exclusion.

Over the past year, older people and younger ones with experience of disability have begun to work together in our district to make it more inclusive, more age and disability friendly. They find they have much in common. This journey began last year with the Whakatane District Council's Ki Mua project to develop a common vision and priorities for our district.

Leadership was shown by members of the Whakatane branch of People First, a national organisation run by and for people with a learning disability. They initiated well attended meetings for disabled and older people to ensure their views could be voiced and heard in this new, district-wide vision.

Many ideas were mooted: improvements to kerbs and toilets, an easy-to-read council website, more pedestrian crossings, accessible buildings, shops, playgrounds and beaches, and more opportunities for employment. But, most important of all, participants wanted a way to ensure their voices would continue to be heard in our district.



INCLUSIVE: Above, Bernadette Moses, a member of Whakatane People First, an organisation run by and for people with a learning disability, speaks at a meeting of Whakatane District Council about how it can help make the community more inclusive. Photos supplied

COMMUNITY: Below, an initial meeting for the Whakatane District Council's Ki Mua project held last year.

A Disability and Age Friendly Advisory Group was launched at the end of 2017. In other communities such groups give advice only to councils, but ours is independent.

It is available to advise anyone, from shopkeepers to police, councils to clubs, on how to get things right, to ensure people who experience disability can play a full part in life in our district.

Through this joint venture between younger and older people experiencing disability, Whakatane has joined the Age Friendly Communities movement begun by the World Health Organisation in 2006, and promoted here by the Office for Seniors. Having an age-friendly community makes good economic sense, both for tourist enterprises and for other businesses.

I have often heard older people complain that shops, where they would like to spend

their money, are just not accessible. No wonder some disabled people move towards online shopping.

An initial project of the new advisory group is designed to ensure that everyone can get around our communities safely, with improvements to some of the kerbs that are dangerous for people using mobility scooters or powerchairs.

A submission to the council's 10-year plan asked for a blue line to be painted on the pavement to indicate safe ways for young children and people on scooters to travel, from the hospital to Kopeopeo to town, past the schools.

These routes would then have priority for improvements to kerbs, and more pedestrian crossings and islands on busy roads.

The council's response was positive, suggest-

ing this project be included in the walking and cycling strategy. They also noted that the group would need to consider the balance between access for those with disabilities with those wanting recreational activities. Interesting.

I guess we should give the benefit of the doubt to whoever penned that sentence. I am sure they didn't really mean to imply that disabled people do not themselves seek and deserve recreational opportunities.

Seriously though, the disability community has long experience of the lack of priority given to their needs when they are subsumed under a strategy for the able-bodied.

Given the rise in the numbers of people with impairments, and those using mobility scooters, surely they deserve their own strategy and funding? A letter has been sent to the council to this effect. We await their response.