



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Led by a gentleman

'Disability' has always been close to home.

I was aged 14 or possibly younger when I started cultivating this passion. It all began when Fr Paul Chetcuti, a Jesuit priest, would organize school visits to *Dar tal-Providenza* for the mischievous boys who conceivably needed a reality check that the world is bigger than the tomfoolery they were constantly involved in.

And so it goes, a group of us started going there regularly and we loved it.

Initially we were merely involved in helping out with the maintenance, stacking food-stuffs in the store, peeling potatoes and carrying out other miscellaneous kitchen duties. At a later stage we started supporting the residents of this home as well. I must admit that it was a sector that captured me straight away and changed me inside-out. In fact, I soon started visiting every weekend, hooked on this 'cause'. I would catch a bus to Siggiewi and walk or hitchhike from the Piazza to *Dar tal-Providenza* where I met people, who lived there, who became close friends and who thought me a lesson or two. I also had the opportunity to meet and work with some radiant members of staff (others less brilliant) and I had the privilege to cross paths with Mons Mikiel Azzopardi who had an incredible vision for this sector.

My experience didn't end there. I spent two more summers participating in what was called a community students scheme. I grew up to love the sector but soon realised that it wasn't all fine and dandy. This agenda was packed to the brim with human tragedies of persons with a disability who are victims of social injustice, exclusion, hardly integrated and dependent on charity and handouts.

I realised early on in my teens that disability is a big issue and it isn't just about providing services and collecting money but about social justice, creating a space and a level playing field where people can dream, fantasise and aspire. Furthermore, until some time ago we still had persons with a disability locked up in underground cellars, institutionalised, parents struggling to make ends meet and on the brink of poverty, siblings with hardly any support and persons with disability completely isolated. We are still not out of the



woods but there is light at the end of the tunnel.

At the back of my mind, I always wanted to make this cause a central part of my life.

In fact, as soon as I achieved my University degree I remember driving up to *Dar il-Kaptan* (Foundation for Respite Care Services) which provided respite services for families having members with a disability. I got myself a job with this NGO and was involved in every task under the sun when working there. I was involved with families in my social work capacity, I went on the media to promote the organisation, I did care work, dishwashing, drove the van, worked with siblings, designed programmes and managed a care-team. Later on, I also coordinated a social work team, supported a boy with Down's syndrome and a young man with autism and helped set up agency support.

But even though I remained involved in the sector for all these years, I started realising that this sector needed to step up a gear. Something was seriously lacking.

'Disability', even though with a great deal of contribution by stalwarts in the sector, like Mons. Mikiel Azzopardi, Dr Lawrence Gonzi and a few others, somehow still lacked the spark. What worried me most was the dearth of leadership with 'no face' that represented

the transformation that needed to be made. Not that this sector was abandoned by the different governments, because it wasn't the case. In fact every 'administration' provided for this sector; be it resources, ideas and a vision. Probably in terms of social policy, having a Parliamentary Secretary responsible for disability rights was a major development that helped to draw all the bits and pieces together.

However, I must admit that I was starting to lose hope until some years ago, that the 'disability field' could have a leader who spurs the sector forward, who is able to take disability from a services focused model to a human rights model. But as it so happens, NGOs remain the nursery that breed and give rise to so many quality leaders. And this was the case once again.

In fact, a young hip-hop artist who hit the 'dance floor' like the world owned him nothing, a break-dancer, streetwise and sharp-witted in the good sense of the word, with distinctive sparkling eyes took this sector by storm.

He co-founded and was soon managing Breaking Limits, most likely the only NGO completely led by persons with disability till this day that had its roots ingrained in street-based dance and which he gently steered into 'disability'.

Every time I met this young man, I was amazed how focused

he was on the positives and I was hoping that the authorities would soon realise the potential bottled up in this person. Although still young it was already clear he was committed to the 'cause'.

Obviously I am referring to Oliver Scicluna (scene name, Jimbo Thinlegz).

He is a person with a disability, some impairments seen others aren't, but his approach to life is amazing. His fresh look, exquisite personality and resilience are staggering. In a number of interviews he has given over these last couple of years, Oliver has transmitted reassurance and a feel-good factor and this outlook has really started to steer things forward.

As I said earlier on, this sector was lacking in leadership.

Not a leader with the presumption that he or she knows it all purely because one has an impairment, but someone who leads in an upbeat way. Oliver is not interested in making a name for himself, not concerned in being the token person with a disability - but wants to be involved and engaged in the core issues, seeking to bring about social justice. Oliver was raised by a family that perceived disability as an opportunity, as a challenge. They let go, gave him space and like the great parents they are, they preferred to take in the worry than stop him from getting on with his life. He played ball, climbed walls, went to parties, developed relationships and did all the things every teenager is entitled to. And all this showed in the way he grew up as a person and his interpretation of the World around him.

Oliver is an inspiration and a motivator. I've seen jaws drop when he talks. Simple language, straight to the point, no strings attached, no hidden agenda just saying it as it is.

He makes so many, me included, want to be part of the change and of the transformation that is required in this sector, an evolution in terms of standard of living for persons with a disability and a much needed revolution in the way people think about disability. Oliver is surely best placed to lead the way.

But I believe that one experience that has marked his life is the passion that drove him in his 'Hip-Hop days'. The same way the Hip-Hop scene has its four manifestations; 'the oral, the aural, the physical and the visual', Oliver is making big changes in the way the disability scene 'articulates' the issues, makes sure persons with disability 'listen' to what the community is saying, he is demanding 'tangible changes'

in society and providing the 'optics' so that disability is no longer seen as a deflated entry into the community but a life experience of great affluence.

Oliver has managed to plug the amps and in the same way Hip-Hop started with a struggle against racism, Oliver is leading the fight-back against 'disablism' we still experience in this day and age. Oliver is calling out with the same 'beat boxing' intensity he is used to during every single interview, initiative and enterprise he gets engaged in. For him disability is not as a liability but a positive facet in society.

Most probably one of the biggest challenges in this sector was reconciling the different factions that have drifted away from each other, NGOs which were in constant collision, academics, policy makers and researchers not feeling they belonged to the sector anymore, a knee-jerk way of designing policies and the list goes on and on. Lately, this young man was appointed in one of the most important roles in the disability sector, the Chairman of the National Commission Persons with Disability, and the impact he has had on the sector is there for everyone to appreciate.

This young man is turning around the way we have done 'disability'. It's no longer about reparation and impairments, it's no longer about having a go at everyone who is not disabled, it's no longer about being obsessed on theories and coercing society into taking fault. Oliver is showing without any fanfare and trumpet blast that people with disability, if they have self-belief, carry their personality and character with pride and seek to improve their skill-sets - can have a good and happy life.

Oliver's head is not in the sand.

He has never claimed that we don't have hostile communities. In fact he continually criticises the lack of sensitivity and pleads and uses all the tools at his disposal to see to the necessary changes.

Oliver is high spirited, fiery and above all doesn't interpret disability as being the end-of-the-line for those experiencing it but the beginning of the journey into completeness.

Unquestionably, Oliver puts my mind at rest - we are being led by a gentleman!

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