

## Don't miss such a great opportunity to change people's perspectives of disabled people.

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### ■ Overview

In this interview series, professionals who are involved mainly in the promotion of sustainability in Olympics/Paralympics Legacy are featured. This time we deliver our interview to Ms. Tara Flood, who are working enthusiastically for realisation of inclusive education and equal treatment between disabled people and non-disabled people.

### ■ No Difference between Olympic and Paralympic

#### Athletes

Motohashi: Could you tell us about current projects you are working on?

Flood: I am a chief executive of Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE). It is an organisation run by disabled people. One of our main missions is to campaign for realisation of "Inclusive Education". We believe that children should not be segregated on the basis of age or disability in access to education, and call for inclusion of disabled children and young people in mainstream education, that is "Inclusive Education". In Britain, non disabled children can choose one from three local schools in their area. In theory, this applies to disabled children; however, there is a legal caveat (Children & Families Act 2014) which allows the school or council in charge of the area to challenge parental choice for inclusion if the school/council can



prove that “the presence of a particular disabled child interferes with the efficient education of other non disabled children in the same school”. On this basis the child is not allowed to attend a regular school. In other words, disabled children do not have the right to attend a mainstream school, if they so desire, let alone the right to choose a school as non disabled children do. ALLFIE is working to change the whole education system to achieve inclusive education, under the plea that “choice should be a real choice, and there is no need for special needs schools.”

Motohashi: Were there any special policies related to people with disabilities or school education at the time of London Olympics and Paralympics?

Flood: There was no official policy regarding school education, but LOCOG had a program on developing people’s understanding of disability. As part of this programme, we lectured at schools across the country to develop people’s understanding of the value of the Paralympic Games so that Paralympic athletes can get the same level of attention as Olympic athletes get, with equal importance. What was important in arguing for this was to get people to understand that Paralympians are top athletes as well as disabled people, and are the same in that regard as Olympians.

Motohashi: Was there a division of responsibilities or roles in deciding and implementing policies at national, city and organizational levels?

Flood: The government was not really involved, but LOCOG was very enthusiastic. They provided funds for ALLFIE and other organizations run by disabled people. They talked about the Paralympics as well whenever they talked about the Olympics, and treated the two equally. The mayor of London also had an aim of “making London the most disabled–friendly city in the world by 2012.”

Even before the London 2012, the presence of disabled peoples had been relatively common in British society. It was not unusual to have disabled people living in the community or see disabled people on TV. However, seeing Paralympic athletes side-by-side with well known athletes, like David Beckham, during the host city selection process, symbolising the equality between disabled and non–disabled people, was revolutionary since the Paralympics had always been historically treated secondary to the Olympics.

## ■ Changing Media Perspectives of Paralympic Athletes

Motohashi: What do you think was the most successful aspect?

Flood: It was that we were able to start changing the media stereotype of Paralympic athletes

to some degree. In general, the media's focus used to be on "how a particular athlete acquired and overcame his or her impairment," which has been shifting gradually to "how he or she is going to compete in a game and contribute to the sporting success in Britain." Also, disabled commentators provided commentaries for the majority of the Paralympic Games as well as some of the Olympic Games, which sent a powerful visual message that London 2012 was one great inclusive sporting event.

It is incredibly important to change the media's view because it hugely affects the way people perceive difference. On the other hand, media interest is usually short-lived; therefore, it is important to continuously host sporting events in the future in order for the media to be educated on raising awareness, and for people to maintain their excitement.

Motohashi: Do you think your experience as a former Paralympian contributed to your success?

Flood: Even though it has been 20 years since I retired from elite sport, the media were highly interested in the fact I was a former Paralympic gold medallist swimmer. I received a lot of interview offers, and I invited other disabled leaders and provided opportunities to speak. I think it is an effective strategy to use some disabled leaders with all media exposure to reflect the voices of disabled people as much as possible.

## ■ Use Media Effectively – Tokyo 2020 is a Great Opportunity to Change How People Think of Disability

Motohashi: What are some of the keys to make the Tokyo 2020 successful in your view?

Flood: Japan should fight for equality of the Olympics and Paralympics, and not give up from the beginning assuming that it is going to be too hard. In London, there was an atmosphere of the whole nation moving forward, and behind it was lots of active involvement from disabled people. Of course, it did not completely transform the environment that disabled people live in, but it was the first step for a change. There will be global media attention on how Tokyo deals with the Paralympics and disabled people in Japan, so you need to use it effectively.

Motohashi: Could you send any message for Tokyo 2020?

Flood: Although the Games are a great opportunity to change the way people think of disabled people through the media, they take place just for a short period of time. Therefore, you need to be well prepared so that you can take advantage of the media effectively before and after the Games. You have the luxury to spend six years to prepare – use every minute of it well. It is also important that disabled people step up

to the forefront in sending messages to the media. You should launch a talent search for these people right away and get them involved from the planning stage. LOCOG not only included disabled people in the Ambassador team, but also requested the media, who are often blamed for a negative portrayal of disabled people, to cover Olympic and Paralympic athletes equally. TOCOG should definitely follow that path.

Interview date: 25/Sep/2014

### **Tara Flood**

Tara Flood is a disability rights activist and has been the Director at the Alliance for Inclusive Education since April 2006. Tara has been involved with the disability rights movement at a grassroots level, for the last 14 years, and she is committed to creating social and political change, that will deliver equality for all disabled people at a local, regional, national, european and international level. Tara was involved in the discussions at the United Nations in the development of the new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and is now working to get the Convention fully implemented. Tara works with organisations led by disabled people, allied organisations, children's rights organisations, statutory agencies and Government departments, both in a personal and professional capacity, and is committed to the voices and experiences of ALL disabled people being at the heart of discussions and decision making about our lives. Tara is a disabled person and a 'special' school survivor.

