Champion Australian Paralympian says regardless of difference, we all have a part to play in society

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As this year's International Women's Day (IWD) comes around, one of Australia's most successful Paralympians and NSW Institute of Sport coach, Louise Sauvage OAM, reflects on her journey.

Proud of the success she has achieved in her life, Louise credits her "pioneer" mum Rita for leading the way and not letting her disability stop her from rising to the top of her field.

Now 49, the Melrose Park NDIS participant, who has arthrogryposis and a few other conditions, said when she first started school most children regardless of their physical or intellectual disability were sent off to a special school.

"My mum was like, 'What do you mean a special school? My daughter is going off to school with her sister'," Louise said.

"At that time other parents who had children with disabilities were like 'Really'. Mum was an older parent. She wasn't influenced by one decision. It was more about asking lots of questions about how each decision as I grew was going to impact my life.

"I am very grateful for my mum's decisions. She was a pioneer back then. She knew what I was capable of. Just because I was in a wheelchair didn't mean I couldn't do what others could. I just did it a bit different. Mum bucked the trend," Louise said.

Sharing her mum's tenacity, Louise said she has seen a move towards equity in so many areas, particularly for women and she's loved being part of it.

"It doesn't matter whether you have a disability or not. Sure, I'm female, I have a disability, it's a very visual disability, but I can still play an important role in my community and in society. Opportunities are there and they should be given to others," she said.

"People forget we are all different. We all have our own personalities, like, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses. Some people are tall, some are short, so we need to look beyond our differences.

"We need to look at the person, who they are and play to their strengths. No matter what everyone should be able to enjoy experiences, be part of something and feel like they belong regardless."

Never letting disability get in the way of living her best life, Louise said to ensure continued equity people need to ask questions if they're unsure about what people can and can't do.

"I think there is some fear in communities about how to approach people with disability. Some people don't know what to say or how to react, but for me I see it as an opportunity to educate them and to help break down barriers," she said.

“I think once you understand a person with disability, it changes the way you think. You become more understanding and considerate.”

Louise said now Australia has a NDIS, people with disabilities are getting the supports and equipment they need to enjoy greater social and economic inclusion.

“I’ve always had my disability, so I’ve never known any different. You never really think about other supports or equipment to help improve your life. You just go with it and make do with what you have,” she said.

It was only when Louise became an NDIS participant she was shown equipment like an oven that opens from the side to make it easier to get things in and out.

“I also discovered a hand shower. I’d never had one before. I thought wow. These things are great and yes, they would make my life easier.”

A wheelchair user, Louise said she also received funding for maintenance around her home, and for car modifications to her personal vehicle.

More broadly, Louise said the NDIS is breaking down barriers. She can see it is helping to better educate people about disability and it is creating greater awareness across society.

As for advice for others with disability from an Aussie sporting legend, Louise said figure out your passion and go for it.

“You’ll find your community; you’ll find your people who will make it happen. They are the people who will give you a go,” she said.

“It can be frustrating. I won’t deny that but if it’s your ultimate goal I think the sky’s the limit. You have to find a way. There’s always got to be a first for everything.”

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