Short Interview with Dr. Robbie Francis Watene

Her Abilities Award Winner in Rights 2020

What achievement are you most proud of?

The achievement I am most proud of is contributing towards a shift in thinking where the lived experience of disability is no longer considered a weakness, but a strength. For too long the knowledge of people with disabilities has been subjugated and considered inferior to the knowledge of professionals, experts, and people without disabilities. I am incredibly honoured to be considered as having expertise in disability rights - not only because of my qualifications, and not despite my disability, but because of my experiences as a woman with a disability.

What's your message to women with disabilities?

Women with disabilities belong. We belong in the room, at the table, in the conversation, in negotiations, and where decisions are being made. We belong just as we are.

What is your vision for an inclusive society?

An inclusive society is one that values and celebrates our community - the disability community - in its entirety. It is one that upholds our civil and political human rights, as well as our economic, social and cultural rights. It is also a society that unreservedly justifies the quality of the implementation of our rights.

What are the barriers you have faced in your life and how did you overcome them?

Growing up, I didn’t see many people like me in positions of power or leadership, which led to feelings of loneliness and a lack of confidence in my ability to affect change. So, I began to actively search for allies working in the social justice space - other women and people with disabilities, marginalised populations, people with lived experience of injustice, indigenous persons, and others. I soon discovered that I was, in fact, standing on the shoulders of giants and journeying alongside an infinite number of passionate, driven, and experienced social justice and human rights warriors. It was then that I realised that I am not, and will never be, alone on this journey.

What is your response to winning Her Abilities?

It is an absolute privilege to be named the winner of the Her Abilities Award in Rights for 2020, in fact I feel quite overwhelmed! But it is also important to acknowledge that this honour is not about my work as an individual, but the tireless efforts of a global community who have paved the way for the realisation of my rights as a woman with a disability. I can only do what I do because of those who have supported, encouraged, and believed in my work, and the work of the Donald Beasley Institute and The Lucy Foundation. For this I am eternally grateful.