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'No one Alone': Standards Plus and the Belonging Initiative, Waipuna Hotel, Auckland

There is a particular anthem that you might hear at weddings; at funerals, at school graduations and even at football matches.

It has been given life by an 'A list' of celebrities, from Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Alecia Keys, Mario Lanza, Ray Charles all the way through to Kiri Te Kanawa and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

The lyrics are very simple, and universally known:

Walk on through the wind; walk on through the rain

Though your dreams be tossed and blown

Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart

And you'll never walk alone.

Why is it, that this particular song is so sought after? What is it in the lyrics that lifts the spirit, that unites and inspires us to join together?

I think we will find the answer in this conference.

I am so pleased to be able to join you at the opening of the national disability conference; and I want to commend Standards Plus for your initiative in bringing people together to focus on the theme, No One Alone.

No One Alone reminds us how vital that sense of camaraderie, belonging, friendship and love is to every aspect of our life. The obvious corollary is that loneliness and isolation can dramatically affect our general health and wellbeing.

I am pleased to see here family members, friends, health professionals, and people with disabilities.

All of you, together, define what the conference programme described as "*that which makes our life worth living*". Indeed the opportunity for meaningful and supportive relationships for people with disabilities is arguably that which gives shape to our life, it provides meaning, and importantly sustains us through the inevitable highs and lows; the good times and the bad.

This conference brings together the best of the best; in terms of people and organisations who promote the concept of social value.

I was really inspired last year when I visited the Community Living Project in South Australia. Fundamental to the success of that project is what they call the ***Circles of Friends***.

This is such a simple - but fabulous idea. At its most basic, it encourages friends and the wider family to look out for the interests of the disabled person by literally wrapping a circle

of friends around them. It is great to know that Jayne Barrett from the project is going to be sharing their experience with you in a couple of workshops tomorrow.

When I returned home to Aotearoa from my trip to Adelaide, I immediately asked the Ministry of Health to look at this project, to build on our own efforts to find the best ways possible to support people with disabilities to be living the life they want in their own homes.

It is good to know that there is such shared support for opportunities to work alongside providers, government, community agencies, and importantly families and disabled persons themselves, to plan and prepare pathways to a better future.

We have the **Families Action Support Team** from Palmerston North - which I understand features in the workshops this afternoon. Their motivation is very straightforward - they want to raise the standards of living for people with disabilities in the promise of a good life.

FAST is also part of the collective of organisations which come together under the Belonging Initiatives group. FAST along with the **Parent and Family Resource Centre**, and **Standards Plus** came together in 2008 to establish support circles across the country.

I have really warmed to the philosophical approach of Circles of Support. It seems to me such an effective strategy towards ensuring individuals have the strength of authentic and enduring support networks all around them.

The concept of authenticity is crucial in the creation of support circles.

The personal stories of people with disabilities have demonstrated that when a relationship is not freely given, there can some time exist the potential for abuse, and at the very least, an individual may feel vulnerable.

In projects like the Circles Initiatives, people are invited to become involved in a person's life - the relationship therefore becomes a two way thing, where both parties invest in each other.

During these three days you will be hearing from a number of different experiences of providers and parents in Canada: from British Columbia; Durham and Alberta - stories being shared here about the challenge of overcoming a reliance on paid support as a substitute for real friendships.

And I want to just throw into the conversation, the challenge that independence and interdependence are not mutually incompatible.

Indeed far from it - I believe that our capacity to live life more effectively and more joyfully; to manage the challenges and opportunities that come before us is also through appreciating the strength of relationships we have with each other.

Such an appreciation forms the foundation for the work we are advancing here on Whanau Ora. Whanau Ora invests in families as the source of our greatest strength. It sends the message no one is alone - each of us have whakapapa - genealogy - that bind us together, and connect us to wider circles of support.

In Whanau Ora while the goal is greater self-reliance and self-determination; it is also about fostering our interdependence, that is our roles and responsibilities to the greater collective. Whanau Ora is the profound realisation that whanau can do it for themselves.

Another key aspect of Whanau Ora is that collaboration and cooperation provide the platform for a sounder future. Again, that theme, No-one alone permeates.

As an example of this, we are currently in the midst of the Expression of Interest process for selecting providers who will deliver Whanau Ora. I am delighted to report that while we have been clear right from the outset that we are starting with just twenty sites; we have received a stunning 130 proposals representing the combined efforts of some 347 providers.

It truly reveals to me the spirit of co-operation that is being woven across our communities and will consolidate the success of Whanau Ora whether or not Government funding is allocated.

Finally, I want to just touch on the application of Social Role Valorisation and I want to thank Wendy Kopura from Access Ability in Whanganui for her initiative in sharing this approach with me.

Whether you call it Social Role Valorisation; whakamoemiti; or meditation, the capacity to imagine a better life is a powerful source of motivation in seeking and shaping the good life.

At its very essence, the theory is around tapping into the opportunities and possibilities that help with life-building and life-making.

Michael Kendrick describes different categories of roles that help all of us to feel valued in our communities - roles such as neighbour, employee, sportsfan, friend, athlete, travelling companion.

It is his contention that many people who have a disability do not usually have access to the full range of roles available and so often feel cheated out of a good life. The implication is that the bottom line is that people with a disability should focus on their impairments and settle for less.

What Social Role Valorisation does - and indeed this entire conference - is to challenge that view and instead say that every person is capable of being fully human, and taking up every possibility that the gift of life offers.

It is about focusing not on what people cannot do, but more importantly on what they can, and even more, what they might yet do and be. It is that call, to walk on with hope in our heart, to be supported to explore our dreams and develop our potential.

To this end, I am very proud of the menu of initiatives that we supported in Budget 2010 such as

- **the fund to focus on attitudes** - recognising that the limits of a disabling society can be one of the greatest barriers for people with disabilities;
- the appointment of an **independent watchdog on disability issues** through support to the Human Rights Commission and the Ombudsman; and

- for **strengthening the voice of disabled persons, particularly through disabled persons organisations.**

This is a very important conference. I will be eager to hear back at the end of the three days, to listen to your voices, to learn from your leadership in enabling all to experience the Good Things in Life.

There is no greater challenge than to imagine what it is that makes life worth living - and then to put the plans and preparation in place to make it happen.

I wish you all a very successful few days together, and hope that when you next sing the theme anthem to never walk alone, that you know that walking with you will be this Minister, this Government, and all the members of this conference.