

Natalie Wade: Disability rights advocacy and pro bono innovation



Natalie, aged 4 years with her sister and their friend



I was born with a physical disability in 1989. It was a time where the compulsory institutionalisation of people with disabilities had come to an end but placing a person with a disability in an institution was still an option. The recognition of the right to education and employment was in its infancy with segregated schooling and employment opportunities being exceptional rather than expected was the status quo.

As I grew up through the nineties and noughties, I was relatively oblivious to the oppression and marginalisation of people with disabilities. Everyday acts of discrimination and ableism, like having to undergo an IQ test to be accepted into mainstream school or not being able to enter into the private rental market because there are no accessible options were normalised and accepted. Then I went to Law School. Somewhere between the teachings of the Priestly 11 and the self-awareness that sets in for most 20-something-year-olds, I became increasingly aware that the disability community were not only being shut away, they were being abused, exploited and killed. I also became acutely aware that I was entering a profession that could change that course.

Counterintuitively, I became a government lawyer. But I could not resist spending my spare time in the evenings and on weekends, researching and publishing on disability rights law topics. I founded and led disability rights committees within organisations, like Australian Lawyers for Human Rights. I gave speeches and submissions about the legal frameworks that oppressed or failed to protect people with disabilities. I focused on systemic issues facing the disability rights movement and funnelled my ever-growing legal expertise into dismantling them. I took particular interest in the participation of people with complex communication needs in courts. I published

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Natalie
in her wig
and gown

articles on the topic and gave public seminars, arguing that evidence laws should be reformed, and judicial officers given more training to facilitate the evidence from these people.

In 2015, the South Australian Parliament enacted changes to the Evidence Act which allow for people with complex communication needs to give evidence with communication assistance, such as with a Communication Partner. Law reform is an important tool for the disability rights movement. We, people with disabilities, face immense challenges in achieving equal



Natalie sitting in her wheelchair in front of street art

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recognition before the law and immediate reforms are needed to better protect and promote our human rights. Lawyers contributing to the law reform agenda offer an incredible opportunity to create better laws that give disability rights lawyers the tools they need to better protect their clients.

While the time I spent being a government lawyer by day and a disability rights law reformist by night was productive and rewarding, I have since founded a boutique disability rights law firm, Equality Lawyers. Equality Lawyers exclusively represents people with disabilities and their families. As a private practice with a sole focus on disability rights, I have had to innovate our approach to pro bono legal services. Rather than focusing our pro bono efforts on people experiencing economic marginalisation, we offer pro bono services to people with disabilities and their families as a service of last resort and where the case requires the person to go up against a much more powerful party, like a government department or private corporation. Our pro bono clients have usually exhausted all other options and have a situation that is so specific to the lived experience of disability, a disability rights lawyer is the best option to present their case. The goal of our pro bono services is to equalise the power imbalance between the person with a disability and other party, and to ensure that no person with disability is left unrepresented when they need it. ■

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Natalie speaking with the Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG



Natalie Wade is the Founder and Principal Lawyer of Equality Lawyers, a disability rights law practice based in Adelaide, South Australia. Throughout Natalie's legal career she has focussed on the advancement of the rights of people with disabilities in Australia. Be it through leadership and advocacy such as establishing Australian Lawyers for Human Rights Disability Rights Subcommittee or by publishing articles and taking part in conversations on law reform topics that change the way people with disabilities access their everyday rights, Natalie has been a consistent voice on human rights issues facing people with disabilities. Since establishing Equality Lawyers, Natalie has been exploring innovative ways to provide accessible and inclusive legal services to people with disabilities and their families. Natalie hopes that in the future, all legal services; private, community and pro-bono, will be accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities.