

## **Response by Chris Mitchell on receiving Maritime Service Medal at Sydney International Boat Show 5<sup>th</sup> August 2017**

Thank you very much for this recognition, but we need to acknowledge my partner Jackie Kay who should be recognised as the mother of Sailability around the world.

Jackie has MS and we moved to Nowra, where we built our perfectly accessible house, so she won't travel any more, as the world, even Sydney, can be quite a challenge, and therefore dangerous, for a wheelchair user.

It's been an interesting ride for us, as I designed our first boat while living in Singapore. The little 2.3 was originally intended as the perfect sailboat to introduce Asians to sailing. It had nothing to do with disability. I didn't know anything about disability.

In 1992 I moved back to Australia and set up a factory in Dandenong, helped by Paul Keating's New Enterprise Incentive Scheme program. At this time, Sailability was just beginning.

Because of the ballast keel, seating facing forward, steering with a joystick, and the reefing system, all of which makes them very stable, safe, and easy to handle, they became the foundation of Sailability in Australia, and subsequently around the world. But they were never designed with that in mind, they are of Universal Design and therefore can be sailed by anyone.

Sailing is maybe the only sport where you can truly include everyone, as we do in all our class events. Our Hansa Class World Championships, the next is 2018 in Hiroshima, have every level of ability, from young able bods, their parents, their grandparents, people with an intellectual disability, vision impaired, paraplegics, quadriplegics using electric powered servo control systems, all competing together.

But only 20% of sailors at our recent Australian Championships identified as being disabled. The significance of this however seems to escape sailing administrators around the world who insist on branding our boats as "disabled", or "specially designed for the disabled", and can't see that if boats like this were used more broadly, three things are likely to happen.

- 1). Thousands more people would be attracted to the sport, which would probably turn around the decline in sailing participation.
- 2). We could move on from the segregated model as disabled people could participate in the main stream. That's inclusion.
- 3). It would give sailing something to crow about, that it's a socially progressive sport instead of a symbol of wealth and privilege. That's changing its image.

Maybe sailing being kicked out of the Paralympics will have a silver lining and herald an understanding of what inclusion actually means, and can achieve.

We are always banging on about disability not being something odd or special, as it's really a normal function of living. In fact, you will all become disabled one day. Disability is the club you can all join in an instant.

What we should be talking about is Diversity. We are all different, there is no norm, other than its normal to be different. Inclusion considers the needs of everyone, including those with extreme difference.

Universal design and inclusion are actually two sides of the same coin. If you want inclusion you obviously need to use equipment that everyone can use, so the chosen toys need to incorporate elements of universal design.

Being accessible is easy, it's about providing access, whereas inclusion requires a change of heart, where you actually make people from diverse backgrounds feel welcome.

The NSW Government is the leader in Australia as the old compliance based Disability Discrimination Act has been replaced by the Disability Inclusion Act, and all NSW councils are now preparing their disability inclusion action plans. The boating industry in NSW should be aware of the changes and opportunities this will bring.

Over the years we have evolved from being a boat builder into more of a social justice outfit. We know how inclusion benefits the whole community. We are interested in inclusive design in all its aspects, not only sailboats, but also waterfront infrastructure and tourism.

So if anyone has a need we are always available to help in any way we can to help make a marina, a yacht club, or a boat more accessible. Inclusion however is more complicated as it requires a change in attitude.