

We Are Not Alone (WRNA): Lessons from a youth-led event promoting positive social wellbeing among youth with disabilities

Authors:

Kleidon I, Lincoln R

Rheanca Lincoln is 18 and a Bachelor of Veterinary Science student. She is a Youth Advocate with the Queensland Family and Child Commission where she contributes to Government policy and strategies. Rheanca was an ABC Heywire 2023 winner, working with other young winners to create *We are not alone*.

Imogen Kleidon is 17 years old, and a Bachelor of Biomedical Science/Doctor of Medicine student. She is the member for Toowoomba North in Queensland Youth Parliament, and refuting minister for the Science and Innovation committee. Imogen was an integral part of the *We are not alone* local youth committee.

Background:

In Australia, one in six people have a disability, 90% of which are invisible. Six ABC 2023 Heywire winners ideated '*We Are Not Alone Day*' to address the isolation and loneliness faced by youth living with disability in regional areas. We also strived to dismantle ableist attitudes through creating connection, empowerment and positive social connections within the community.

Approach:

We Are Not Alone united the Toowoomba Region in a hands-on and inspiring conference. With performances, workshops, organisation exhibitions, guest speakers such as Dr Dinesh Palipana and Carly Findlay, and a youth with disabilities plenary session, we created solidarity and support for disabled young people in our community. *We Are Not Alone* created a safe space and an opportunity for disabled young people in the Toowoomba Region to make new connections and strive for change.

Outcome:

Through guided activities, local organisation exhibitions and guest speakers, youth were able to connect through lived experiences and form friendships. The sharing of relatable stories from the youth on the disability panel was cathartic to many in the audience. The workshop titled *Our Accessible Future* led to meaningful conversation surrounding diagnostic barriers and the lack of support grassroots disability support organisations receive, indicating projects we could work on in the future.

Innovation and Significance:

This idea was initiated by six youth at the ABC Heywire 2023 Summit and then led by six other young people in the Toowoomba region. The young team who prepared this event came from diverse backgrounds, ensuring our event was representative of the intersectional lived experiences in our community. Our event endeavoured to encompass the Social Model of Disability and normalise accessibility through designated quiet rooms, sensory accommodations, wheelchair accessibility, gender neutral bathrooms, air conditioning and provision of face masks.