

Low expectations no longer the norm

By Karen Gee & Genevieve Clay-Smith

Meet Matt, Ruth and Nathan who are challenging society's low expectations of people with Down syndrome through their leadership, talent and creativity.

From the moment of their birth, people with Down syndrome face being underestimated by the community. A culture of segregation and lack of opportunity means people with Down syndrome have generationally faced barriers to accessing basic human rights such as education, employment of choice, housing, social opportunities and more – often due to society's low expectations of people with disability in general. Down Syndrome Australia is committed to providing opportunities which showcase the talents, skills, and leadership abilities of people with Down syndrome in order to challenge the common low expectations of what people are likely to achieve with their lives. One of the goals for Down Syndrome Australia is to build a new understanding within society: that people with Down syndrome can, and do, meaningfully contribute to our world.

When Down Syndrome Australia decided to commission the design of a new logo for the upcoming World Down Syndrome Congress to be held in Brisbane in 2022, it

was important for the organisation to collaborate with artists with Down syndrome to lead the designs. An open call went out for submissions with the selected designs announced at Government House in Canberra on World Down Syndrome Day, just past.

Tasmanian artist, Matt Hoori's design was selected to be developed into the logo in combination with elements from the submission from Charlie French, an artist with Down syndrome from Texas. Matt's approach to developing the work was centred around themes of connection and equality, *'The sun connects with everyone in the world,'* he said. The creative process included coming up with several ideas and then choosing the design which he felt best connected to the spirit of the Congress *'It's all about community, shining like the sun, eye contact, it connects me to everybody,'* Matt explains.

Matt was proud to be included in the project and happy that the talents of people with Down syndrome were recognised and utilised in designing the logo. He's also excited about what's happening next, *'I have been invited to go to Brisbane for the World Down Syndrome Congress,'* he adds.

Brisbane's Ruth Faragher is a proud woman with Down syndrome and also a member of the Queensland branch of the Down Syndrome Advisory Network (QDSAN),



a group of people with Down syndrome who meet monthly to provide advice and guidance to the board of Down Syndrome Queensland. Ruth was on the judging panel to select the Congress's logo design, 'I went to Government House in Canberra, I had to announce the winner for the logo competition. It feels so exciting that I have been asked to be a judge...I was very happy.'

Ruth stresses the importance of including people with Down syndrome in every level of decision making when it comes to producing projects designed for them. She explains that being involved in leadership roles gives young adults the opportunity to articulate their opinions, 'We have decision-making about [events like] the gala dinner, challenge weekend, the New Year's Eve Ball, and that's why it's really good for young adults.' Ruth's ambition to profile the leadership skills of people with Down syndrome is clear, 'I like other people to be included, too. That's why I'm with QDSAN, it's important to have all people included, counted,' she says. 'If they don't have Down syndrome, they don't understand about Down syndrome. I like to show them what [people with] Down syndrome can do, that's what I want,' she explains.

Nathan Gooley is an artist based in regional NSW whose work featured in a 2018 tourism film commissioned by Tokyo Metropolitan Government to promote Japan's capital in the lead up to the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Nathan was recently employed by Down Syndrome Australia to produce character designs for a short, animated video promoting the message of inclusion



to children. 'It felt good because I like drawing,' he says. Nathan's character designs for the animation are bold, vibrant and inspired by mythical creatures in order to be appealing to the project's target audience; kids.

Like all artists employed to produce creative conceptual work, Nathan was briefed by the animation's production company Taste Creative and was given creative freedom to express diversity in his own unique way. The characters include a wizard, a ballet dancer, a sea monster and other fantastical designs. 'I looked at books and pictures to get ideas and Taste Creative also shared their ideas with me,' he explains. Real faces were paired with Nathan's animated bodies: people with Down syndrome, people with physical disability, people of various nationalities and ages were all included in the video, which will be shown in schools and across social media. 'I really loved watching the Down Syndrome Australia animation and seeing my name in the credits!' Nathan is currently working towards an art exhibition as well as making T-shirts to sell.

For Down Syndrome Australia, employing people with Down syndrome in key creative roles to produce marketing and communications projects, as well as supporting them in leadership roles, like the Down Syndrome Advisory Network, is key to an inclusive future.

It is obvious that people with Down syndrome have what it takes to work within a versatile range of industries and jobs, evidenced by Matt, Ruth, Nathan and so many others: the creative and innovative results speak for themselves.

Go to the Voice website for digital versions of this article including an interview with Matt Hoori and a written piece from Ruth Faragher.

www.downsyndromevoice.org.au

Karen Gee is a professional writer, editor and theatre maker and Genevieve Clay-Smith is a co-founder and director at Taste Creative.

