

Speech at the opening of the Gracelands Group of Services new regional service centre, Te Awamutu.

04 Jun 2009

May I begin by greeting everyone in the languages of the realm of New Zealand, in English, Māori, Cook Island Māori, Niuean, Tokelauan and New Zealand Sign Language.

Greetings, Kia Ora, Kia Orana, Fakalofa Lahi Atu, Taloha Ni and as it is afternoon [sign].

May I specifically greet you: Tom Barratt, Chair of the Gracelands Group and your fellow trustees; Robyn Klos, Chief Executive of the Gracelands Group; Your Worship Alan Livingston, the Mayor of Waipa District; Pippa Mahood, Deputy Mayor of Hamilton; distinguished guests otherwise; ladies and gentlemen.

My wife Susan and I are delighted to be with you today in Te Awamutu for the opening of this new regional centre for the Gracelands Group of Services.

I have been asked to formally open the new facility, but before doing so, I would to speak about the significance of the new centre and the role of the organisation in supporting those with disabilities.

In May last year, I had the honour to travel to the United Nations in New York to represent New Zealand when it received the Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Disability Award.

The award, made jointly by the World Committee on Disability and the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, reflected a sustained commitment by our country to address the needs and wellbeing of New Zealanders who live with long-term impairment.

In particular, it reflected adherence to the principle that everyone is born equal in dignity and worth. As a human right, everyone is entitled to live a life to the fullest extent of his or her abilities. Empowering and supporting those with disabilities is not just a social nicety, but rather a deep obligation stemming from a commitment to human rights. New Zealand's work to that end is reflected in a number of initiatives.

At the international level, New Zealand was one of the first countries to sign the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which it did in March 2007. It then ratified the Convention in September last year.

At the national level, reference can be made to things like the Human Rights Act 1993 which outlawed discrimination on the grounds of disability, the creation of the Office of the Health and Disability Commissioner and adopting New Zealand Sign Language as an official language. These national initiatives have in turn been supported by work of the Minister for Disability Issues, (currently the Hon Paula Bennett), and the Office for Disability Issues.

Obligations and commitments, conventions and strategies, ministers and offices, all sound very fine in speeches. But to be meaningful, they must be reinforced by concrete deeds in the community.

At a local level, a commitment to those with disabilities has been reflected in community services such as those provided by the Gracelands Group of Services.

Since its establishment as a community disability support service in 1991, I have learned of the Gracelands Group growing to support more than 2000 people who are either disabled or disadvantaged.

From small beginnings, its services now include therapy services for those with significant intellectual or physical disabilities, rehabilitation services for those recovering from injuries and many employment and training services for all sectors of the community.

In the community of Te Awamutu and the surrounding area, these 'concrete deeds' are particularly evident in behind all of this. The community's support for the fundraising of the Graceland Group's new building, raising \$2 million in less than five years, is nothing short of remarkable.

I know that you have had some notable help like the Finn brothers who returned to their old part of the country to give a concert-and I am told that those tickets sold out in seven minutes.

The kind of community support that has been the hallmark of this fundraising effort is clearly also evident day after day, week after week in on-going offers of employment and voluntary help.

In particular would like to pay tribute to your founder and Chief Executive of the Gracelands group, Robyn Klos.

In the booklet put together for this opening ceremony, Robyn has explained her motivation in setting up the centre. She says:

"I came to believe that what a person does during their day gives their life value and purpose. To be of use to others is something we take for granted. Yet for many disabled people, this appears to be an unattainable goal. If we can stand alongside the people who use our services, offering support and expertise to enable them to achieve their aspirations, our own lives can also be fulfilled."

Robyn's words remind me of an apposite Māori proverb: '*Haere te torino whakamua, whakamuri*' which translates '*At the same time as the spiral is going out, it is coming back*'.

This centre and this community are a living example of that proverb. And the Gracelands Centre is a living example of New Zealand's commitment to support all people with disabilities to participate fully in society.

As Governor-General, it gives me great pleasure to declare the Gracelands Group's new service centre officially open.

And on that note, I will close in New Zealand's first language Māori, by offering everyone greetings and wishing you all good health and fortitude in your endeavours.

No reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, kia ora, kia kaha, tēnā koutou katoa.