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I can make a difference and so can you!

Nicole Flynn

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Article abstract

Nicole Flynn is a twenty-four year old advocate, artist and athlete with Down syndrome. Nicole began public speaking at eight years old when she would talk to various groups - such as classes at the University of Toronto and at Humber, Centennial and Seneca Colleges - about her achievements and goals. As she got older, she started to speak seriously about people who are different and how they want to be treated with equality. Nicole is also passionate about saving the environment. This speech was written for a Youth to Youth Summit in September, 2017.

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An Interdisciplinary Journal

*Honoring the Voices, Perspectives and Knowledges
of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses,
Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews*

I can make a difference and so can you!

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Abstract

Nicole Flynn is a twenty-four year old advocate, artist and athlete with Down syndrome. Nicole began public speaking at eight years old when she would talk to various groups - such as classes at the University of Toronto and at Humber, Centennial and Seneca Colleges - about her achievements and goals. As she got older, she started to speak seriously about people who are different and how they want to be treated with equality. Nicole is also passionate about saving the environment. This speech was written for a Youth to Youth Summit in September, 2017.

Keywords: *Down syndrome, developmental disabilities, human rights*



This is a photo of a Red Tailed Hawk. The hawk has impressive vision which means it can see very small details when soaring above the earth. It is unique to see a Red Tailed Hawk perched in the open where it is so clearly visible. Photo by Nicole Flynn.

When you hear things that happen in the news, do you feel emotional? Do you see things in your community and want to change it? Do you stand up for what you believe in? Do you like to understand things from different perspectives? Does debating an issue sound exciting to you?

Albert Einstein once said, **“I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.”**

There are things; issues that happen today, that make my blood boil. I am a very passionate person. I feel things deep inside.

I want to make a difference in society and I have the attitude to make a change.

According to Winston Churchill, “Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.”

Maybe, he was talking about me!

I have many passions, but the two I am focusing on are: the environment and speaking up for people who have a developmental disability, like Down syndrome.

I am a nature lover. I respect our wildlife and their habitats. I am afraid that one day the only place we will see natural habitats and our wildlife will be in photographs or paintings; works of art. **We won’t see deer as we pass a field or forest. We won’t have turtles to watch as they sit on a log in the sun.**

Their habitats are being destroyed because of our desire to have more. Humans are taking over **and we don’t even recognize the negative impact this will have on future generations.**

There is a saying, **“We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors; we borrow it from our children.”**

I believe this saying. I take my responsibility to our environment seriously.

In May, 2017, I was in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I visited the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I heard about the abuse, neglect and genocide that happened to the Indigenous children in residential schools. I heard about the children being scrubbed to make them white. I was told about the sterilization that occurred so they would not be able to reproduce.

Then I heard about the children who had a developmental disability who were at the same schools. The same starvation, physical and sexual abuse happened to these children too.

At the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, I read about children being tested and given a label that affected their entire lives. These children were labeled moron, imbecile, or an idiot and were put away in institutions.

Hidden.

Like the Indigenous children, they were sent to residential schools.

Not a lot has changed for the Indigenous population or for people who have a developmental disability.

Neither population is provided with proper education services.

Limits are placed on people. For example, when I attended high school I was not permitted to **take credit courses. I wasn’t allowed to complete the requirements for the diploma.**

Not having an education leaves people on the fringe of society and a life of poverty.

There are not even enough homes for people who have a developmental disability. Many of us are living in institutions like jails, hospitals and long term care facilities.

Like the Indigenous people, we are still being abused.

I have Down syndrome. In 2013, the World Health Organization had to remind the world that people who have Down syndrome are indeed human.

WOW!

In Canada, 90% of the babies identified as having Down syndrome are aborted. They are not permitted to live.

Those who do survive are treated as second class citizens. They are not provided with quality speech therapy that will help them learn to communicate.

They do not receive an education that will help them with employment opportunities.

People with Down syndrome do not gain employment at a fair wage that will support them above the poverty line.

This doesn't just happen to people who have Down syndrome, but to all people who have a developmental disability.

It is assumed they are not able to work.

They are!

They want to work. I want to work!

It may just take more time, but we are employable and able to participate fully in our communities. When people take the time to get to know us, they realize we are the same as everyone else. We want the chance to try.

Having Down syndrome doesn't stop us... society does.

It's the pressure society puts on us that doesn't allow us to reach our full potential.

I didn't want to sit around debating and complaining about life.

I wanted to make a difference.

In 2015, I became involved with the "We Have Something to Say" event with the Ontario Ombudsman for youth and children.

In 2016, a section of my submission was printed in the **Ombudsman's** report. I presented a copy of this report to the Mayor of my town, Tom Deline, who asked me to make a presentation to the Council. He also advised me to take my presentation to our Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP), Todd Smith and our Member of Parliament (MP), Mike Bossio.

I did and I was excited by the response because I felt that I was heard. I felt that I was starting to make a difference.

MP Mike Bossio asked me if I'd like to meet the Prime Minister. I don't know how I responded out loud, but inside I was yelling, "HECK YEAH!"

I didn't think any more about it, and then one day I received an invitation to have a tour of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa with Mike Bossio. I was so excited I couldn't sleep. I began counting down the days. Finally, it was here and my parents drove me to Ottawa.

Being at the Parliament Buildings was amazing. I'd been there before, but it meant so much more to me this time because I saw it as a place where changes can happen, where people make a difference in the lives of Canadians.

After a nice lunch, we went along a hall and this is when I learned that I was going to be able to meet Justin Trudeau in his office. I was so excited, my palms were sweating. I was going over what I wanted to say to him in my mind. I had my poem in both English and French to give him.

Suddenly, it was my turn and there he was, so tall and friendly. He said he was very pleased to meet me and he thanked me for being a leader and that he was proud of all the things I was doing.

WOW!

I couldn't get over the fact that he was thanking me. He's the Prime Minister.

I'm me.

Later, I received a photograph of Justin and myself which he had signed, and again he made a comment about my leadership in the community. People wanted to talk to me about meeting Justin. People in my town were proud that I had met the Prime Minister.

I felt like I was making a difference. I felt that I was being seen as a person who stood up and demonstrated ability.

I realized there are things that I can do. I can meet my goal and live my dream of being involved in politics. I can make the lives of people who have a developmental disability better. I can advocate for our environment, and I can be a voice that is heard where it matters.

I realized that I needed more education. Through Quinte Adult Education I was able to graduate with the Secondary School Graduation Diploma and I am now attending Loyalist College. I am taking my time so I can learn as much as possible.

I have started a People First chapter in Central Hastings. This is a group for people who have a developmental disability. We talk about issues in our community that affect us, like housing, employment and social opportunities.

I am also on the pool committee in Madoc. Our pool is getting old and needs to be replaced so I am working with the committee to make decisions as to the type of pool that is best for our community. I am learning a lot about how a meeting is organized.

I am also learning how to accept different views.

Most of all, I am learning that I can make a difference.

And so can you!