

What rain? It's purple reign at Suntec City

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About 10,000 people gathered yesterday at Suntec City despite the rain to show their support for people with special needs in the annual Purple Parade.

Observers told The Sunday Times that disability causes appear to be gaining greater support, judging by the turnout. Last year, 7,000 attended the event, up from the 5,000 in 2014, and 3,000 at its inaugural run the year before.

Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the guest of honour, said in his speech: "As we say in our National Pledge, 'We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people'.

"The 'we' is very important. Every year and every decade, we make the 'we' more meaningful... It is a 'we' of every ability, of all our people."

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong attended last year's event.

While Mr Nicholas Aw, president of the Disabled People's Association, has seen significant progress in awareness about disability issues in the past six years, he said people can do more.

"What are we doing at home to educate our children to be inclusive?"

"What are you doing at your workplace to hire and integrate persons with disabilities?"

"Are you going out of your way to socialise and build real friendships with those with a disability and their support networks?" asked Mr Aw.

To this end, Dr Justin Lee, research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, called for a deeper understanding of the issues facing people with disabilities.

Using the Yellow Ribbon Project, which pushes for reintegration of former offenders, to illustrate his point, he said: "The public is highly aware of Yellow Ribbon itself, but are they really aware of ex-offender issues, and will employers be willing to hire just because of those campaigns?"

The type of jobs matters too.

Ms Chia Yong Yong, nominated MP and president of SPD (formerly the Society of the Physically Disabled) said: "We should be aware, not just of how much public support is garnered for inclusiveness in terms of employability, but more so with the substance of this progress." For example, people with disabilities should not be underemployed, she said.

Dr Lee said since campaigns backed by the state gain traction easily, future Purple Parades should set out specific goals which might include plans on how people can interact with those with special needs in schools and at work.

"(There is) no need for even more members of the public to become generally aware but not that interested. We change their minds about people with disabilities when we interact with them," said Dr Lee.

The need to combat ignorance was made clear after a woman was filmed verbally abusing the mother of a child with special needs and the video was uploaded on citizen journalism website Stomp.

Ms Denise Phua, mayor of the Central Singapore District and a champion of those with special needs, said such cases happen because of "ignorance, prejudice, non-acceptance or just plain nastiness".

But as awareness of special needs issues increases, she is hopeful that such encounters will be rare.

"Every such incident is one too many and is always hurtful.

"Families should try to not let these negative experiences rob them of their peace and joy in life," she said, adding that she and her son, who has autism, have faced such nastiness before.

"For every negative incident, my family has received more than our fair share of blessings from strangers who go out of their way to be kind and considerate," she added.

That is why Ms Phua, who is also adviser to the Purple Parade committee, said she was heartened by the turnout for the Purple Parade yesterday.

"It's always been a rain-or-shine event... What is some rain or sun, compared with the challenges that a person with special needs may face in his life?"