



Rising Together During National **DISABILITY RIGHTS AWARENESS MONTH**

From 3 November to 3 December, we proudly celebrate National Disability Rights Awareness Month, honouring our members living with disabilities, who make a difference every day. They bring unique strengths, perspectives, and courage to one of the toughest industry sectors out there - wildland firefighting.



Disability Awareness

Disability means many things to many people, but the World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as “an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.

An impairment is:

- a problem in body function or structure,
- an activity limitation which may include a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action,
- a participation restriction which is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.

Disability awareness is dedicated to:

- making people aware of the rights of persons with disabilities,
- making information available and accessible for persons with disabilities to grant them equal access to socio-economic opportunities,
- promoting the use of the abilities of differently-abled persons, and
- demonstrate our organisation's commitment to promoting, protecting and upholding the rights of persons with disabilities.

Types of Disabilities

Types of disabilities include various physical and mental impairments that can hamper or reduce a person's ability to carry out his day to day activities. Some disabilities may be hidden, known as an invisible disability. There are several sub-categories:

- **Physical** - affects a person's mobility or dexterity.
- **Intellectual** - affects a person's abilities to learn and interact.
- **Psychiatric** - affects a person's thinking processes.
- **Sensory** - affects a person's ability to hear or see.
- **Neurological** - results in the loss of some bodily or mental functions.

Communicating with people with disabilities

When communicating with someone with a disability, it's important to remember to treat each person as an individual. Through positive and appropriate interactions with people with disabilities, we can **help break down the barriers** that they face in the community and in the physical environment.

It's important to recognise people with disability for what they can do, rather than focusing on their limitations. Here are some general tips:

- Use a normal tone of voice - don't raise your voice unless asked to.
- Be polite and patient - don't rush the conversation.
- Speak directly to the person rather than the person with them.
- Ask the person what will help with communication - there are different ways to communicate.
- Be flexible - reword rather than repeat anything that's not understood.
- Only refer to the person's disability if necessary or relevant.
- Offer assistance if it appears necessary, but respect the person's wishes if they don't accept your offer.
- Avoid saying anything that implies the person with a disability is superhuman, courageous or special.

I am not my disability, see my ability!



Our Superheroes of Strength and Dedication

Avuyile Zinto Storeperson



Avuyile Zinto joined the Port Alfred Base, Eastern Cape, on 12 November 2022. She uses strategic skills to manage resources effectively and keep one of our ground teams equipped. Despite living with disability, Zinto has been pivotal in streamlining logistics and anticipating what is needed before the call even comes in. “For me, being part of this team is about proving that limitations are only in the mind,” she says.

Johan du Plessis Business Development Manager, Accountable Manager ATO, and Acting Quality Assurance Manager

“I suffer from hearing loss and my message would be: Your dreams are not limited by your body, but by the boundaries you place on your spirit. Embrace your strength, for it is your heart that will carry you further than any obstacle ever could.”



Luxolo Matiti Storeperson



“I am grateful for the skills acquired in the programme as I didn’t have skills before being a store person. I was unemployable without skills,” said Matiti. “I learned to manage store items during extensive courses at the Kishugu Training Academy. These skills will assist me in flying high soon. I have been applying for vacancies externally and called to a few interviews. With these skills, I would be employable elsewhere. I am fully confident with the experience and skills acquired over the years,” said Matiti. His dignity, he says was restored the day he joined the programme.

Tebogo Mabel

Storeperson

“I have since broken the shackles of inferiority complex and started living a normal life like many people. The work opportunity exposed me to the good things I missed before. I am grateful and determined to progress in life,” said Mabel.



Olwethu Mogosi

Storeperson

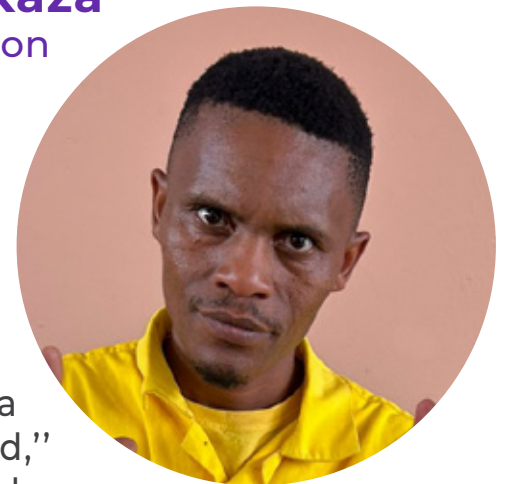
“I intend to register for the tertiary qualification next year. This is to further my education. Crew members serve as a source of inspiration. I now have a sense of belonging to the team. They share progressive ideas that challenge my stereotypes about disability,” said Mogosi.



Xolani Mhlakaza

Storeperson

“WOF has given me a sense of belonging and restored my dignity. I didn’t believe that the store person position was assigned to me. I never thought I’d find employment one day, especially with the high unemployment rate in South Africa. People living with disability are often marginalized for work opportunities. I am making a meaningful contribution to my country. I am elated,” said a jubilant Mhlakaza.



Bongekile Skhosana

Storeperson

“It is our responsibility to prove to naysayers and distractors that persons living with disabilities are equally competent like the rest of the people. I am here to dismiss the negative notions and stigmas about us. We deserve opportunities as well,” explained Skhosana.





Bonolo Kgotlane

Storeperson

"I love and am capable of doing my job at all times. My employment at the Working on Fire programme serves to motivate and inspire other people living with disability. We normally don't get opportunities due to our condition," said Kgotlane

Ayanda Njoko

Storeperson

"The position has given me complete self-fulfillment and purpose in life as I have daily activities to do. This opportunity makes me feel like a complete person once again. I thrive in my role and brushed off the stigma attached to persons living with disabilities," said Njoko.



Nkosingiphile Thethwayo

Storeperson

"With more confidence, the person living with disabilities can make a difference in the lives of their colleagues and families. We should never underestimate and underrate our potential to succeed. I am glad others recognise our contribution to communities," he said.

Sizakele Jiyane

Storeperson

"I am here to defy traditional norms that people with disability don't qualify to work at all. This perennial stigma can only be tackled by the affected persons and employers. With the right training more persons with disabilities can bring change in communities," said Jiyane.





Amanda Espag

Team Leader: Brand and Creative

Autism, Asperger's & Me

Many people are familiar with autism and the spectrum of disorders it encompasses, but not everyone understands the full scope of what it means. Autism is a neurological and developmental condition that influences how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. It's called a "spectrum" because the range and severity of symptoms can vary widely from person to person. Autism affects people of all genders, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

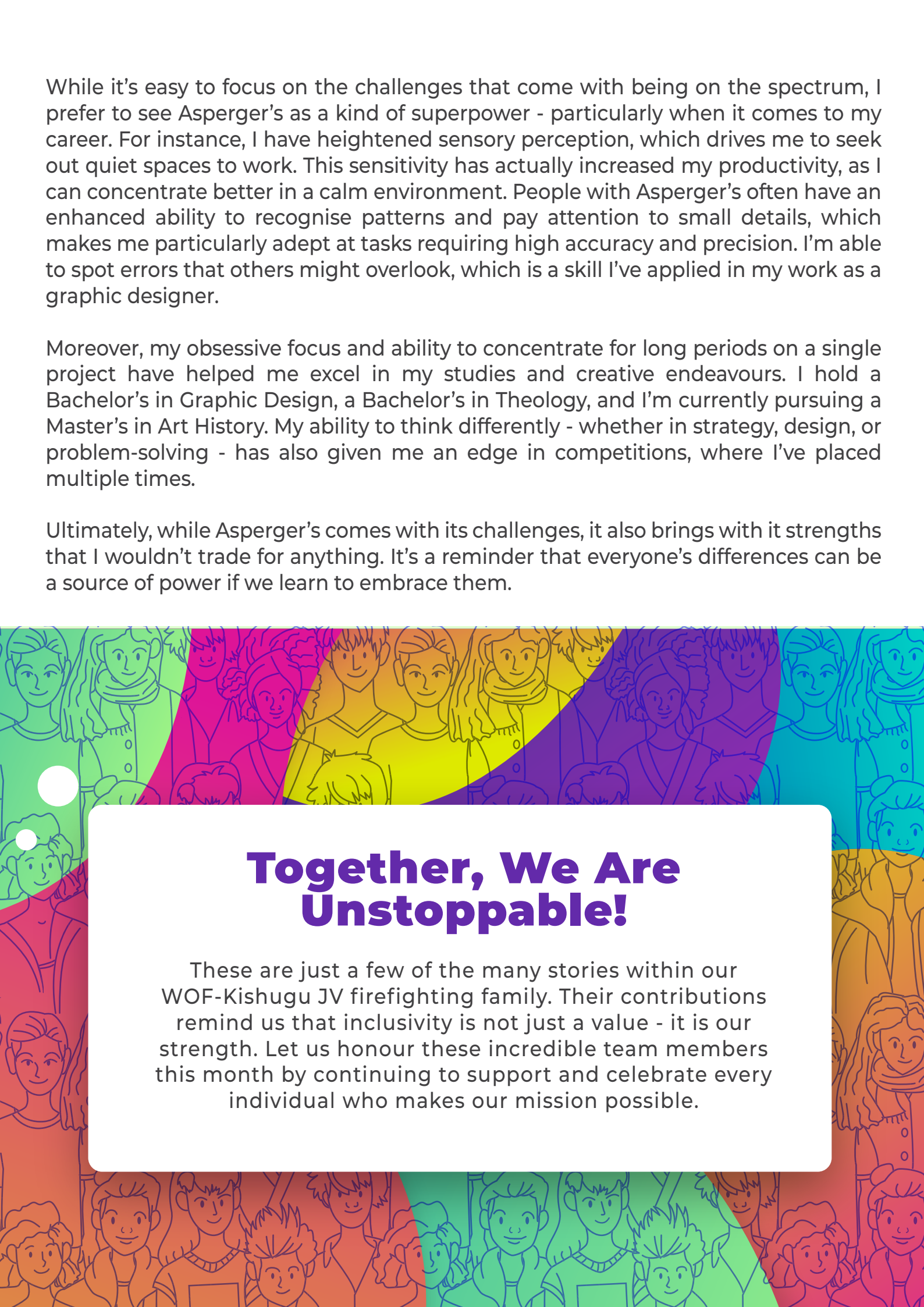
Asperger's syndrome is often used as a term to describe a specific developmental disorder within the autism spectrum. Those with Asperger's tend to struggle with recognising verbal and non-verbal cues, understanding social norms, and regulating their emotions. They may develop intense interests in certain topics or routines and often find it challenging to interpret or respond to the emotions of others. People sometimes refer to this as "high-functioning autism," but I've found this term misleading. It doesn't feel like I function at a higher level - more like I'm constantly playing catch-up with my peers. Neurotypical people often take for granted the small social cues, emotional subtleties, and unspoken conventions that come naturally to them. For someone like me, these things are difficult to navigate, and it's easy to be misunderstood.

The emotional toll of being constantly misjudged can be exhausting. This is one of the reasons that many adults with autism, myself included, experience anxiety and depression. It can feel like an endless struggle to understand others and find a place in the world, which often leads to self-isolation. But there is hope. More people are speaking up about their diagnoses, and awareness is slowly increasing. High-profile figures like Elon Musk, Anthony Hopkins, Dan Aykroyd, and Daryl Hannah have all shared that they have Asperger's syndrome, helping to reduce the stigma.

While it's easy to focus on the challenges that come with being on the spectrum, I prefer to see Asperger's as a kind of superpower - particularly when it comes to my career. For instance, I have heightened sensory perception, which drives me to seek out quiet spaces to work. This sensitivity has actually increased my productivity, as I can concentrate better in a calm environment. People with Asperger's often have an enhanced ability to recognise patterns and pay attention to small details, which makes me particularly adept at tasks requiring high accuracy and precision. I'm able to spot errors that others might overlook, which is a skill I've applied in my work as a graphic designer.

Moreover, my obsessive focus and ability to concentrate for long periods on a single project have helped me excel in my studies and creative endeavours. I hold a Bachelor's in Graphic Design, a Bachelor's in Theology, and I'm currently pursuing a Master's in Art History. My ability to think differently - whether in strategy, design, or problem-solving - has also given me an edge in competitions, where I've placed multiple times.

Ultimately, while Asperger's comes with its challenges, it also brings with it strengths that I wouldn't trade for anything. It's a reminder that everyone's differences can be a source of power if we learn to embrace them.



Together, We Are Unstoppable!

These are just a few of the many stories within our WOF-Kishugu JV firefighting family. Their contributions remind us that inclusivity is not just a value - it is our strength. Let us honour these incredible team members this month by continuing to support and celebrate every individual who makes our mission possible.