



#WeThe15

#WeThe15: The story of the biggest human rights movement for persons with disabilities in history.

Client: International Paralympics Committee

Executive summary

In 2021, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) took a quantum leap towards inclusion by launching the world's biggest human rights movement for persons with disabilities: **#WeThe15**.

The IPC had spent 30 years transforming sports by making the Paralympic Games a respected global event. But despite the admiration expressed towards Paralympians on the podium, outside the stadium they were largely ignored and forgotten.

The world beyond sport needed to change: so the IPC used their platform to make change happen. We built a movement from the ground up to fight for inclusion and dignity, not just for Paralympians, but for the world's 1.2 billion persons with disabilities.

We used humour to smash through the stereotypes and called on the world to see persons with disabilities as **wonderfully ordinary**. Not 'inspirational', not pitiful, and not 'other' - just *human*.

We looked to the world's most powerful brands for the blueprint on starting a global movement, identifying five key ingredients that went on to underpin our success.

We harnessed our own event - the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, using the Opening Ceremony to catapult #WeThe15 into public consciousness.

The result? We reached 80% of the world population with our message, drove 3000+ pieces of worldwide media coverage, changed attitudes around the world, brought the world's most powerful people and organisations on board - from the United Nations to UNESCO, CocaCola, Prince Harry and David Beckham; headlined at COP26, sparked conversations among presidents, witnessed our colours waved on flags in Sudan and even got nominated for a Sports Emmy.

#WeThe15 is here for the long haul. This is just the beginning.

WORD COUNT: 267

Our challenge: changing the world beyond sport

For over 30 years the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) has been breaking barriers for persons with disabilities, transforming the Paralympic Games from an Olympic sideshow into a globally respected and anticipated sporting event.

4.1 billion people tuned in over the course of the Rio 2016 Paralympics. It appeared Paralympians were receiving the recognition they deserved.

But for all the progress the IPC achieved within the world of sport, there was a burning issue we couldn't ignore.

Although Paralympians were celebrated on the podium, they were ignored on the way home.

Every four years the sun shines on them, and then they're back in the shadows. As Stinna Kaastrup, Equestrian and 2016 Paralympian, said: *"When you stop competing as a Paralympian you go from a high achieving athlete to just a disabled person. You lose all social status".*

As we began to focus our gaze outside the Paralympic stadium, a starkly different picture emerged - of a forgotten population seemingly unworthy of society's attention.

The statistics speak for themselves:

- There are more clothes made for dogs than for persons with disabilities.¹
- 90% of children with disabilities receive no formal education.²
- 98% of the internet is inaccessible.³
- 2 in 3 London Tube stations are inaccessible.⁴
- Even Nike's seminal Breaking Barriers Impact Report had two measly mentions of disability.⁵

*And this is a small sample.

This harrowing picture becomes staggering when you consider that persons with disabilities are **the world's largest minority**. They are 1.2 billion people, 15% of the population. And yet they had no global movement like Pride, BLM or #MeToo - no uniting force to increase representation and push for change. Instead, they are systematically ignored in global policy making and left to fend for themselves at the bottom of the global diversity and inclusion agenda.

The world beyond sport needed to change.

We resolved to expand the efforts of the IPC, using our influential platform to create a more inclusive world for persons with disabilities.

We set ourselves a suitably big (and intimidating) mission:

To make the world a more inclusive place for all 1.2 billion people with disabilities.

This would require a tidal change. A cultural tipping point, dissolving the 'us vs them' barrier that has held back empathy and change for too long. And a monumental coming together of the many hundreds of organisations already advocating in this space.

We set three clear objectives (our desired outcome)

1. **Awareness:** Open the eyes of the 85% without disabilities to the 15% of the population with disabilities.

¹ Stephanie Thomas, TEDxYYC, "Fashion Styling for People with Disabilities", 2016.

² UNICEF

³ WEBAIM

⁴ TFL

⁵ <https://about.nike.com/en/newsroom/reports/fy21-nike-inc-impact-report-2>

2. **Attitude:** Dissolve the 'us vs them' barrier so the 85% see persons with disabilities as the norm and not the exception.
3. **Agenda:** Create a uniting force for change to put disability inclusion at the heart of the DE&I agenda.

It was time to build a more inclusive world for persons with disabilities. But you don't change the world without pushing a boundary or two.

Boundary #1: We pushed the boundaries of representation to represent everyone with a disability, *not just Paralympians.*

Representing everyone with a disability was not something we could answer alone. So we assembled a coalition of 18 international organisations.



Through this network we began talking to and understanding the disabled community. We heard a collective cry of frustration at the reductive way that people with disabilities are represented by the media.

As comedian Stella Young put it in her ground-breaking Ted Talk⁶; people with disabilities are portrayed as either pitiful sob stories or they're put on a pedestal and used as inspiration porn.



We all know these tropes. We've seen the movies and watched the videos on social media with 'heart wrenching' orchestral music designed to stir up a mix of pity and awe (your life isn't so bad!) as we watch a person with disabilities complete daily tasks.

⁶ Stella Young, TED, "I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much", 2016.

But this is a lie that at best, is a misguided stereotype, and at worst objectifying, degrading and harmful.

As UNHR Disability Advisor Facundo Chavez Penillas put it: *“I just want the same shitty life you all have”*.

Those 10 words said 100.

You're not born with a disability: it's society that dis-ables and treats people as less than human. The truth is that persons with disabilities are just people. Ordinary, boring, flawed, unremarkable people, going through the same daily motions as the 85%.

They didn't need or want to be seen as heroes.

They wanted to be seen and treated as ordinary.

This gave us our unlock: Having a disability is unbelievably, *wonderfully ordinary*.

We needed to prove to the world there is no 'us' and 'them' - just the same human potential.

The Paralympic Games would become our trojan horse to create something the 85% couldn't ignore, and the 15% wanted to join.

Boundary #2: We pushed the boundaries of marketing to create a human rights movement, *not just a campaign for the Paralympics.*

We couldn't be limited by our past experience. We would start the **world's biggest human rights movement for persons with disabilities**. A 10-year initiative, far bigger than any campaign, with the power to create genuine and lasting change.

As Bridget Angear said in Revolt: *“When you want to create a change, start a revolution. When you want to start a revolution, **create a brand.**”*

So we looked to the world's most powerful brands that had reached 'movement' status: Brands that had created tribes, started conversations, and recruited advocates. Brands like Nike, Apple, Red Bull, and even McDonalds.

We identified **5 essential ingredients** that would underpin our efforts to build a movement from the ground up, pushing boundaries at every step.

Ingredient 1: A strikingly simple identity

We needed a name and symbol to catapult our mission into existence. We pushed the boundaries of branding to build the foundations - not only of a brand, but of a global and enduring human rights movement.

We started with our name.

#WeThe15

▼
a movement for the 15%, by the 15%, and for anyone (including brands) to join.

▼
shining a blinding light on our 1.2 billion strong army for the 85% who overlook them.

We created a symbol.

It was ownable, rebellious and could be passed under the covers in countries where having a disability is a major taboo.



We worked with design agency Pentagram to create a symbol for The 15%. It would be proudly purple to show that world the international colour of disability, while the symbol is a representation of that percentage tilted to 23 degrees, reflecting the earth's axis.

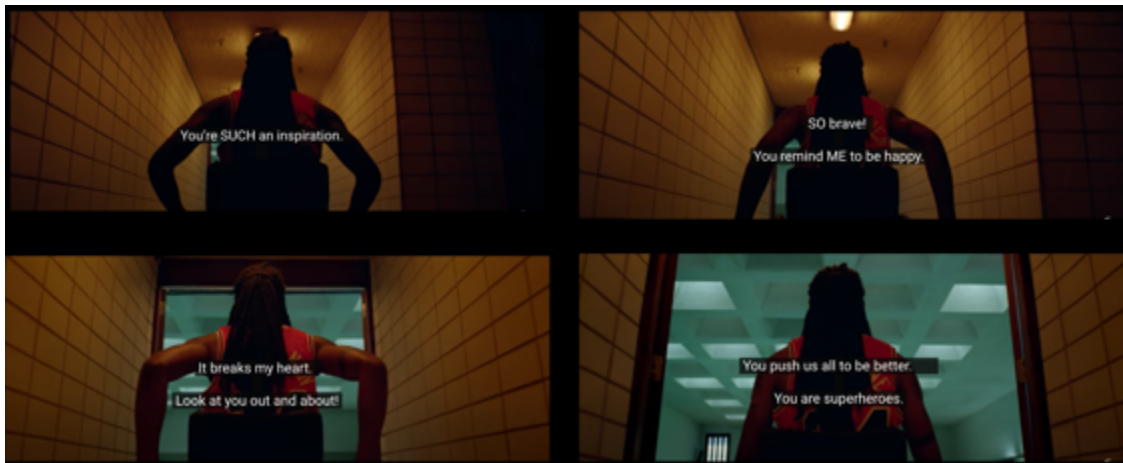


Ingredient 2: A rallying cry

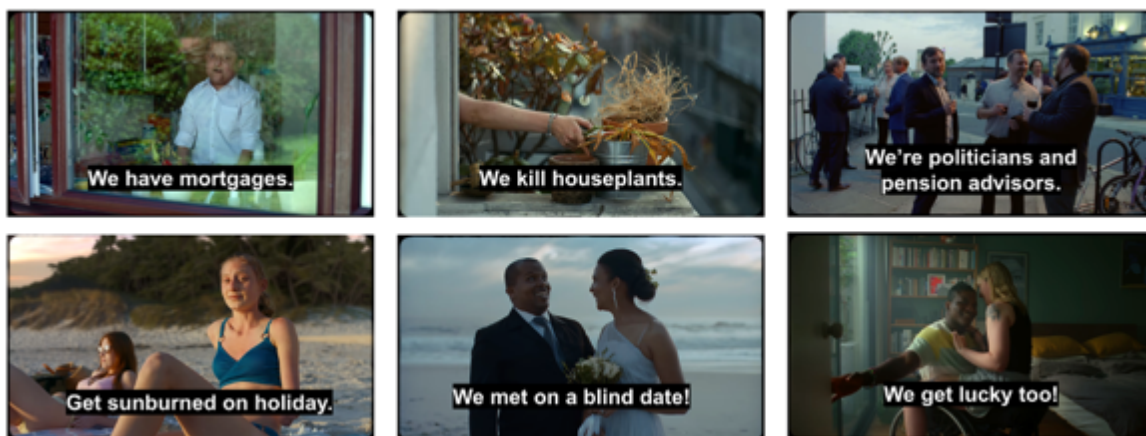
It was time to find our voice.

So we decided to make a film that would push the boundaries of perceptions towards persons with disabilities further than ever before. It was a loud, proud rallying cry for everyone to see the disabled community as **wonderfully ordinary**.

We opened with the tropes everyone expects.



Then playfully cut through the 'inspiration porn' with 'wonderfully ordinary' moments that show people with disabilities have mortgages, get sunburnt, watch porn, kill houseplants and 'get lucky' - the same as anyone.



We worked in collaboration with the disabled community to strike a playful and humorous tone. Our film was a portrayal of life! Why should it be worthy and serious?

And we filmed around the world to include a 45-strong cast of people with a range of visible and non-visible disabilities. We wanted everyone to feel represented.

The result was a funny, fresh and authentic portrayal of persons with disabilities - culminating in our rallying cry: *'only when you see us as one of you, wonderfully ordinary, wonderfully human, only then can we all break down these barriers that keep us apart.'*



Ingredient 3: Momentum

Movements must reach a tipping point - so we needed to make #WeThe15 an unmissable presence around the world. But unlike Nike, Apple and McDonalds, we had no stores or products or real-estate to get our name out there. So we had to **push the boundaries of visibility** - quite literally.

Leading up to the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, we turned 225 landmarks around the world purple. From Times Square to Piccadilly to the Coliseum in Rome, iconic landmarks all over the world lit up in support of #WeThe15.



And we launched striking OOH in stand-out locations in over 60 cities.



Ingredient 4: A big-bang moment

Momentum leads to movement.
We needed a launchpad to explode #WeThe15 to life.

We our own event - the Paralympic Games – as our trojan horse.

We pushed the boundaries of what the Paralympic Games has always been - a sporting event, to become something far bigger:

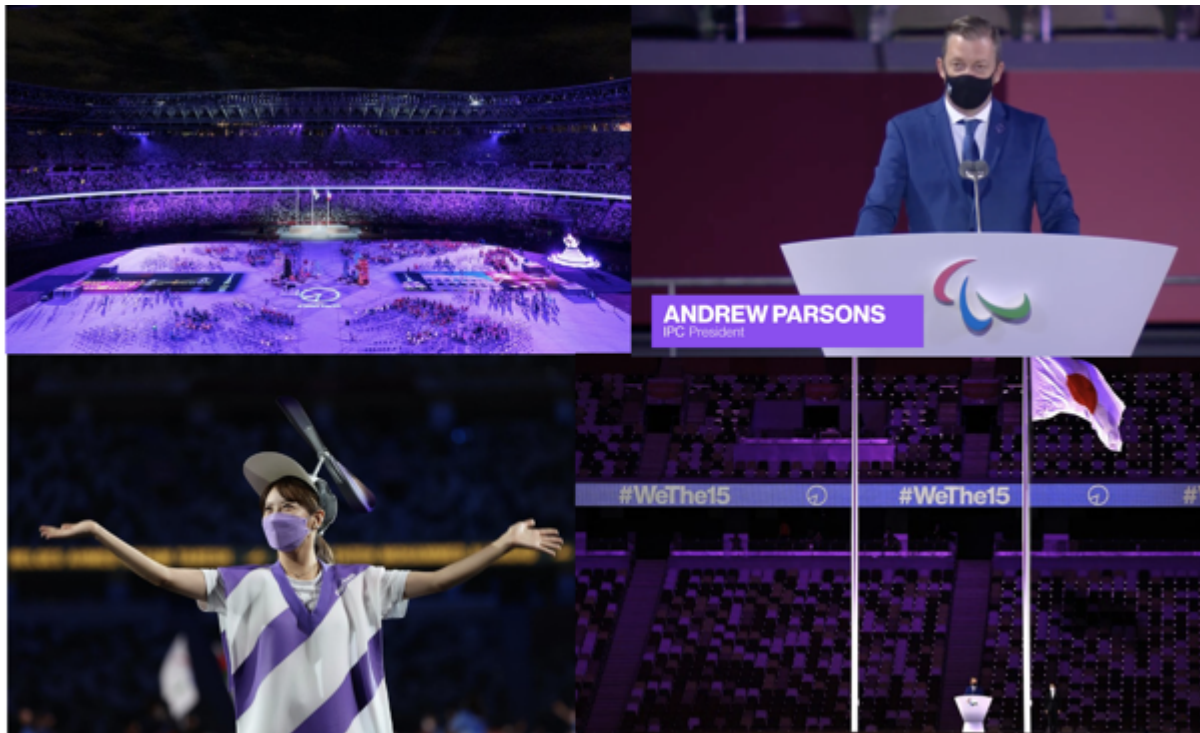
A stage with an enormous global audience.

A megaphone for a billion strong army of people to finally be seen and heard.

A platform to launch a 10 year initiative to change the lives of persons with disabilities.

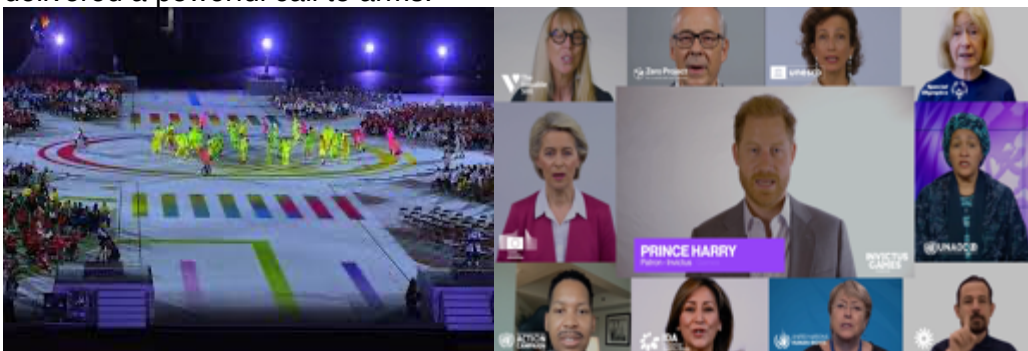
We took over the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games Opening Ceremony.

The entire stadium went purple: all digital boards used our #WeThe15 hashtag and our symbol was projected on the centre circle as the IPC President, Andrew Parsons, told the world about #WeThe15. The film played out in the stadium - and to more than 100 broadcasters that covered the opening ceremony. In an instant we reached 250m people around the world.



The opening ceremony was matched with an equally impactful closing ceremony

#WeThe15 coalition spokespeople including Prince Harry and the UN Deputy Secretary General delivered a powerful call to arms.



Ingredient 5: Advocates

Big bangs are brilliant. But movements need a lasting spark. They need to take on a life of their own and be owned by the people. So we created a sprawling network of advocates, allies and supporters.

The world's biggest media platforms and brands committed to the cause.

PLATFORM PARTNERS	BRAND PARTNERS	
GOOGLE FACEBOOK INSTAGRAM SNAPCHAT TWITTER NETFLIX CHANNEL 4 AMAZON	AIRBNB ALIBABA ALLIANZ ATOS BP BRIDGESTONE CITI BANK COCA-COLA	INTEL OMEGA OTTOBOCK PANASONIC P&G SAMSUNG TOYOTA VISA

Over 3000 influencers and activists (from Ellie Simmonds to David Beckham to Prince Harry to Selma Blair) spread our message on social media, using the #WeThe15 hashtag to bring others on board and inspire change.



And Australian swimmer Ellie Cole and US wheelchair racer Tatyana McFadden joined our podcast to speak to the UN Human Rights Commissioner about their experiences.



If you want to change the world, you have to take some risks.

We risked failing catastrophically

We could have set ourselves a smaller objective. We could have aimed for a marketing campaign to shift perceptions. Instead we decided we would launch the world's biggest human rights movement for persons with disabilities, and in doing so change the world. And thankfully, we did just that.

We risked losing control

Most marketers clutch their brand guidelines tightly and fear the day some unsuspecting young designer decides to go a little rogue with the margin spacing. But not us. We created a brand designed to be co-opted. A movement for the people that would take on a life of its own and be owned by the 15%.

We risked making bad jokes

Disability is normally addressed in hushed and sympathetic tones. But we used humour. We made punny jokes. We were upbeat. We trod carefully. Humour is tricky to get right, especially with an international audience. And the risk paid off. It was the humour that the 15% connected with most of all.

We risked tackling the biggest taboos

Sex. It's taboo in society at-large, and especially when talking about persons with disabilities. But we fought to show someone getting lucky and another person watching porn. We wanted to show all sides of being human - and sex is undeniably one. We took our message around the world, including to countries where even disability itself is a big taboo.

Results

We set out to do three things:

Raise **awareness** of the 15%, transform **attitudes** towards the 15%, and put the 15% at the heart of the DE&I **agenda**.

1. We drove unprecedented awareness

We won the attention of the 85%

Never before have people with disabilities had a voice so loud.

By the end of the Games, 1 in 5 people (or 1.6 billion) *globally* were **aware** of WeThe15.⁸

With zero budget, we reached 80% of the world:⁹

- 6.2 billion saw our message¹⁰
- Our film clocked up 0.75 **billion** views ¹¹

We made a tidal wave on social channels ¹²

- 2.4 billion impressions of #WeThe15 on Twitter
- 196K unique conversations on Twitter
- 9.5 million interactions on Meta channels
- 710k views on YouTube
- 876 million views on TikTok of Disability Awareness.

The media put #WeThe15 up in lights, sharing and spreading our message.

We drove an unmissable global conversation about disability inclusion, earning 3000+ pieces of worldwide media coverage. ¹³

⁸ Nielsen/Fleishman Hillard

⁹ Nielsen/Fleishman Hillard

¹⁰ Nielsen/Fleishman Hillard

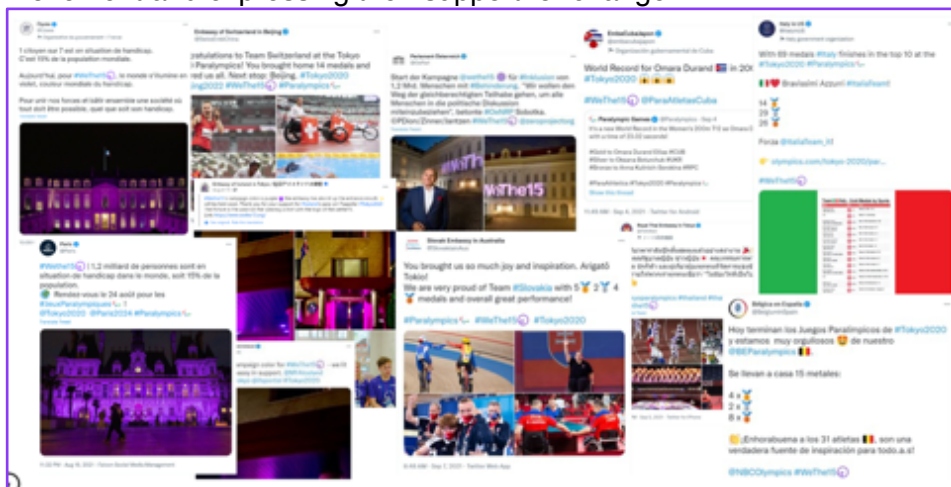
¹¹ Nielsen/Fleishman Hillard

¹² Nielsen/Fleishman Hillard

¹³ Nielsen/Fleishman Hillard



Nations and their embassies expressed their support, lighting up buildings, getting behind the movement and expressing their support for change.



We featured at COP26 in Glasgow weeks later, talking to 21 world leaders about DE&I;

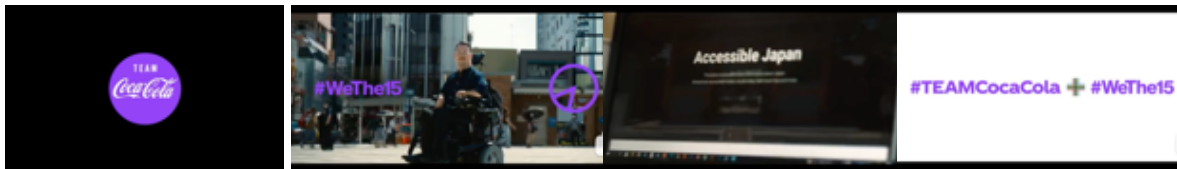


We put disability inclusion at the forefront of conversation among world leaders:

"WeThe15 is a conversation starter with world leaders and governments. When Andrew [Parsons – IPC president] met the presidents of Estonia and Latvia, they wanted to talk about it. They wanted to talk about disability." – Craig Spence, IPC Chief Brand and Communications Officer

We sparked a cultural shift. Brands started talking about disability.

From Samsung to Intel to Coca Cola and beyond, we saw some of the world's biggest brands get behind #WeThe15 in support of ongoing change.



And organisation came together in a united effort for change

The coalition has grown since launch to create an influential steering committee of over 70 members who meet regularly to combine their powers and expertise in the fight for inclusion.

And most importantly, we were accepted as a true voice of the 15%

We inspired Paralympians to join our cause. Throughout the Games they showed their support by sharing our message and wearing #WeThe15 tattoos.



Danish Paralympian Stinna Kaastrup was so inspired she decided to join the IPC on a permanent basis, saying #WeThe15 gave her ***“the right to be a person and take up value in society without being extraordinary”***.

We enabled the 15% to finally feel seen and heard



The movement took on a life of its own, even reaching anti-coup protesters in Sudan who raised purple flags and used our #WeThe15 hashtag on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.



What have we learned from launching #WeThe15?

The power of marketing to change the world

We wanted to start a movement so we looked for inspiration, not among charity campaigns, but among the world's most powerful brands. #WeThe15 is testament to taking the bread and butter of marketing and applying it to the world's biggest problem.

The value of the seeing the bigger picture

The IPC lives and breathes sport. But it was only by looking at the full picture - of the way Paralympians are treated once they step off the podium - that we could realise our vision to make a more inclusive world not just for Paralympians, but for the world's 1.2 billion persons with disabilities.

The importance of recognising bias in your team

No-one in our direct agency team had a permanent disability. And living in an ableist society, we all carry bias and prejudice. So we set up a network of persons with disabilities from around the world who we listened to at every step of the journey. It was their voices, insights and experiences which ultimately created a movement that was *from* and *for* the 15%.

The advantage of coming together

We set out to launch a global movement for persons with disabilities. But we were not the first, and certainly not the only organisation working in this space. From the outset we formed a coalition of 20 organisations with expertise and experience. To succeed, #WeThe15 needed to become stronger than the sum of its parts.

The significance of telling the truth

We showed the world the simple truth: persons with disabilities are wonderfully ordinary. There was no need to overcomplicate or be 'clever' in our approach. We let the 15% speak for themselves. It resonated more than we even anticipated.

It's just the start

This paper tells #WeThe15's origin story. But this is just the beginning.

#WeThe15 is a 10 year initiative, working to build a more inclusive world for persons with disabilities. Watch this space.

WORD COUNT: 2795