

Kiruna's Story

Kiruna wrote her own story.

I am a 33 year old actress living with dwarfism. I am married and live in Birmingham in the United Kingdom, but I was born and raised in Sydney.

I find there is a lot of stigma about, and social prejudice towards dwarfism and that has created barriers for me throughout my life. When I was young, it took me from the age of three until the age of eight to find a dance teacher who taught me like a proper dancer with a potential future, not just a charity case. Other people didn't believe I was worth training.

My dancing led me to an interest in acting and in 1999 I landed my first professional role working in Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*. I used the money I earned in that role to come to England and study Shakespearean and Jacobean plays.

The performing arts have always been a strong calling for me. I love my body and who I am but I also love to redefine it and re-contextualise it in different circumstances. What if I'd been born in America? Or what if I was a lawyer in England? Or a Parisian prostitute in the Moulin Rouge?

For all of these roles I have the same body and the same face (with the exception of make-up) but I am a different character and that's radical because in a subtle way the audience has to imagine a person living with dwarfism can have many faces and be many people, not just one of Snow White's Seven Dwarves. And, they are reminded that we are all people.

Throughout my career I have avoided stereotypical roles for Little People (LPs) and forged a mainstream career exploring the human condition in theatre and in film. So, how have I managed to have a successful career when I was told so many times there aren't many roles for dwarfs?

1. I remembered first and foremost that I am a person, not just a “dwarf”. I can end up in any situation or have any kind of life and be any sort of character with different attributes and a different persona. I imagined and dreamt a life for myself even though I hadn’t seen an LP actor play anything other than an Oompa Loompa or a leprechaun.
2. I sought support from people and groups interested in disability and diversity, and found some mainstream allies.
3. I fought to be trained, and found teachers who believed in me.
4. I took a sideways step and went to university to study media to help me promote my message and make my own films and work, in case no one else ever wanted to hire me.
5. I was adaptive and resilient. When I heard a “no” I believed I wasn't meant to work with that person. Every “no” was a positive because it brought me closer to the people with whom I would find work and support.
6. I used every disability support program and initiative out there to get my foot in the door. I was proud of living with disability and used it as a unique selling point. It has taught me so much about the world and enriched my life. Sure, the barriers are horrible and they suck, but isn't it better to know they exist rather than be ignorant to them? Knowing the barriers and where they are means you can try to change them.
7. I got counselling during the times I felt lonely, so lonely and isolated that I didn't realise how sad I had become until I was happy again.
8. I took risks, emotionally and in my career. I made friends with a political group of people living with disability and let myself feel angry at the world for not helping us to be independent of the physical barriers and for disabling us with the social ones. And I let my anger lead me to take action. It made me dance, cry, write letters of protest and get involved in my union to promote diversity casting practices.

There are barriers I have faced and continue to face as someone living with dwarfism. One is affording a car because I have to get one modified. Another is

handling peak hour traffic and crowds, it can be a nightmare for me and sometimes I feel exhausted because everything is twice as large or twice as far away as it should be for me because of my short legs. I also face a constant barrage of ridicule from strangers for my short, dwarfish appearance. All of these barriers take extra care and energy on my part to handle or resolve.

My family, friends and healthy social network are such an important part of how I remind myself I am normal and not the laughable freak people sometimes treat me as. I have found help from charities such as the UK's Changing Faces. Some of their pamphlets about dealing with reactions to your appearance are great resources and are available online. I also try and remember that when people say or do nasty things they are just revealing their own inadequacies and it isn't about me at all.

Another barrier for me is finding accessible accommodation. This is particularly challenging when I'm on tour. It is important for my husband and I to live in a house where the kitchen and bathroom are adapted to my needs and there is no danger of getting a third degree burn when draining pasta in a sink I can't reach! These issues remain unresolved but are becoming more important as I get older and have less energy to constantly adapt myself to an unadapted environment. Accessible housing is especially important as my husband and I consider starting a family together.

I am proud that I have never learnt to expect rudeness or prejudice. It always surprises me and stings when it happens. I don't ever want to accept that is how I should be treated.

I finance my life through my work as an actress. I have also become a small business owner - my husband and I have created a production company called A Little Commitment. If I couldn't work as an actress anymore, I would have to use my imagination again to meet this latest challenge. In bad financial times I remember Shakespeare's quote, "As long as we can say this is the worst, this is not the worst".

I love my husband, family and dancing. Oh, I love dancing. I love acting. I love coffee with friends. I love dramatic weather, having dinner out. I love adventure and experiences. I love meeting people. I love puppies. I don't love paw paw.

I want to keep being challenged as an actress and for our company to produce great work and to employ other people living with disability, in killer productions. I want to create a rental housing market that caters for people living with disability, so we can seek work and live in communities of our choice and have social mobility.]-

I want to make the world a little bit better and for living with disability to be seen as normal and everyday.

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