Collaboration Forum on Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific 2019

Keynote Address “Barrier Value～Turning Disabilities into Value”

**From “I am miserable” to “a new path”**

Hello, my name is Kakiuchi, I am from Mirairo Inc. Focusing on the term “Barrier Value”, I would like to talk about what disability is, based on my life story. Generally speaking, when people hear the words, “Persons with Disabilities”, they think of handicaps, negativity, and poor, unfortunate people. I once thought, more strongly than anyone else, that I was unfortunate, because my bones broke easily and I could not walk.

From childhood, I had had 20 episodes of my bones breaking, more than 10 surgeries, and I spent one fifth of my life in a hospital room. When I was at high school, I left school for surgeries and rehabilitation. I decided to put all my efforts into rehabilitation, until I could convince myself that if I did all this and things still did not work out, then I would have to deal with it. However, I still could not walk. Yet, when I completed my last round of rehabilitation, I had a sense of relief. I did everything I could, and things still did not work. I think I finally managed to decide to take another direction, to take a new path.

**There were things I could do because I had the disability**

From then on, I started to look for things that I could do although I could not walk, some things I could do despite being in a wheelchair. My turning point came after I went to university. I needed to do some part-time work to earn my tuition fees and daily expenses, but the jobs I could do in a wheelchair were limited. A webpage production company still hired me, but the job they gave me on my first day was sales. “Take this document and visit the clients.” Other sales people visited about 50 clients a day, but 10 was the best I could manage, being a wheelchair-user. But I did not give up and kept going. Before I knew it, I had recorded top sales and results at the company. There was only one reason: Many people remembered me, because I was doing sales in the wheelchair. My manager and president at the time told me, “Your disability is your strength. Be proud.” These words have supported me to this day. I could not stop my tears that night. I realized that I did not just have things I could do even if I could not walk. I realized that there were things I could do BECAUSE I could not walk, because of my disability. This gave me a new light, a new path.

**Launching Mirairo Inc. .**

To communicate what I had realized to all corners of Japan and to the rest of the world, I spent one year in preparation and established Mirairo Inc., when I turned 21. A year, two years, and five years went by, with few sales. My business was always in the red. Still, work started to come in, little by little, as well as other opportunities. Before I knew it, we had expanded to three locations in Tokyo, Osaka, and Fukuoka, with 50 members of staff.

Our first project was to create a barrier-free map, a map of accessibility. In Japan, 31,000 university students have disabilities. That accounts for 0.98% of all university students. When I went to university, 4,900 university students had disabilities. To help more persons with disabilities proceed to higher education, we created barrier-free maps of educational institutions. We also did surveys of buildings, which led to consulting opportunities. Japan is a small country. Even though there was a limit to how much infrastructure could be turned barrier-free and accessible, we believed we could change people’s awareness, even if the hardware could not be changed. With this belief, we launched a universal-manner training business, to teach people how to interact with persons with disabilities, elderly people, and other people with different needs. This program incorporated our universal-manner certification training, although it was still a private certification. About 60,000 people and 600 companies attended these lectures. The lecturers were persons with disabilities, going to various regions for the lectures that led to new work opportunities for them. We also have a service called Mirairo Research to incorporate the opinions and ideas of persons with disabilities in manufacturing and service development. Five thousand persons with disabilities are registered, and they are paid when they use products and fill out questionnaires, which again is a job opportunity for them, allowing them to use their disability-based opinions. Also, jointly with the Nippon Foundation, we have developed an app that aggregates and displays worldwide information about stores, hotels ,and lodgings that are easily accessible for wheelchair users and people with visual and hearing impairment. Right now, the app is available in Japanese, English, and Spanish. I hope you will join us in this effort to gather information about accessibility and accessible stores in your countries.

**Disability and business win-win**

There are three major types of social barriers: Environmental barrier, consciousness barrier, and information barrier. Going forward, it will be important to create stores and facilities that are easily accessible for wheelchair users and blind people, that allow easy communication for people with hearing impairment, and environments to help them work easily. It will be a significant social contribution and create huge business opportunities and economic activities. The first major project we took on was that of Universal Studios Japan, in Osaka. They had about 80,000 visitors a year with disabilities. When we had a closer look, most of these persons with disabilities were visiting Universal Studios in a group of 3 or 4. Meaning, if it is a group of 4, persons with disabilities (and their company) are bringing a total of 320,000 visitors. To attract these 320,000 people, we ensured that all attractions and rides were free of barriers and conducted full universal-manner training for all employees and part-time workers. As a result, the number of visitors with disabilities increased from the initial 80,000 to 120,000. In total, 320,000 such visitors increased to 480,000. Business becomes sustainable only when investments can be recovered. When restaurants and offices see mutual advantages with persons with disabilities and talk about them, more restaurants and accessible workplaces will be created. This initiative in Japan definitely can spread to the rest of the world.

**Facing and accepting oneself**

By nature, we all are different and weak. Some can walk, some can see, some can hear. But why me? Why me? I kept asking myself. I could not accept my weak self. But I realized in a hospital room that, if the basis of our thinking is “We are all different and we are all weak”, asking myself why was a meaningless waste of time. What helped me realize this was a book by Konosuke Matsushita, the founder of (currently) Panasonic Corporation. In the book, he says that he succeeded because of three things: He had no academic history. He was not well. He was poor. That was why he succeeded. These all sound negative. What do they mean? One, he listened intently to others, because he had no academic history. Two, he was unwell, so he could ask others to do work. Three, he was poor, so he was grateful for whatever little salary he earned. When you change your perspective, everything becomes invaluable. That is what I learned. To conclude this speech, I would like to tell you the belief that I always have held close to my heart. Even if we cannot change how long we live, we can change the scope of life we live, as much as we want. By taking action, by learning, and by meeting someone, we can change the scope of our life as much as we want. A focus not on the number of years we live, but on how we live. I hope your life will be like that. Likewise, I would like to live life to the fullest, together with you. Thank you for your attention.