

A Man, An Organization and A Beautiful Partnership

BY NINU KANG

At an early age, a doctor told him that his disability would determine the type of employment he would find. “This was the time it became real for me, that my life would be different than many other people and I would have to choose a career based on my disability.”

Angelo Lam has been living with psoriatic arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis since he was 12 years old. Learning to live with pain has been a life-long journey to understand, accept and express feelings in order to manage daily living.

Angelo and his wife Catharine joined me in a neighborhood café near their home to share some of his story about living and working with disability. I have known Angelo for many years through our work with MOSAIC, however I didn't know very much about his life until I spoke with him to do this interview for TRANSITION. I have always thought he was the most positive, intelligent, creative and able person I know.

Looking back on it now, I wonder if I felt that acknowledging his disability would somehow take away from everything else about him.

Angelo eventually needed a wheelchair to be mobile and he managed his pain by spending much of his time in his head, thinking and creating.

“Dealing with my disability in a cognitive way didn't mean that I wasn't feeling things, but maybe it was a defense mechanism,” Angelo said. “I try to match what is going on in my head to what is going on in my heart. It's part of my constant growth.”

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While many employers have been very accommodating of his disability, much of the work he was able to find was short-term contract. He didn't have the job stability that many people enjoy in their careers.

When Angelo came to MOSAIC in 2008, we had to evaluate our physical environment and our as-

sumptions. We wanted to hire this amazing man, but accommodating disability was outside of our experience at the time. Our board talked about improvements to the building and how we could structure Angelo's job.

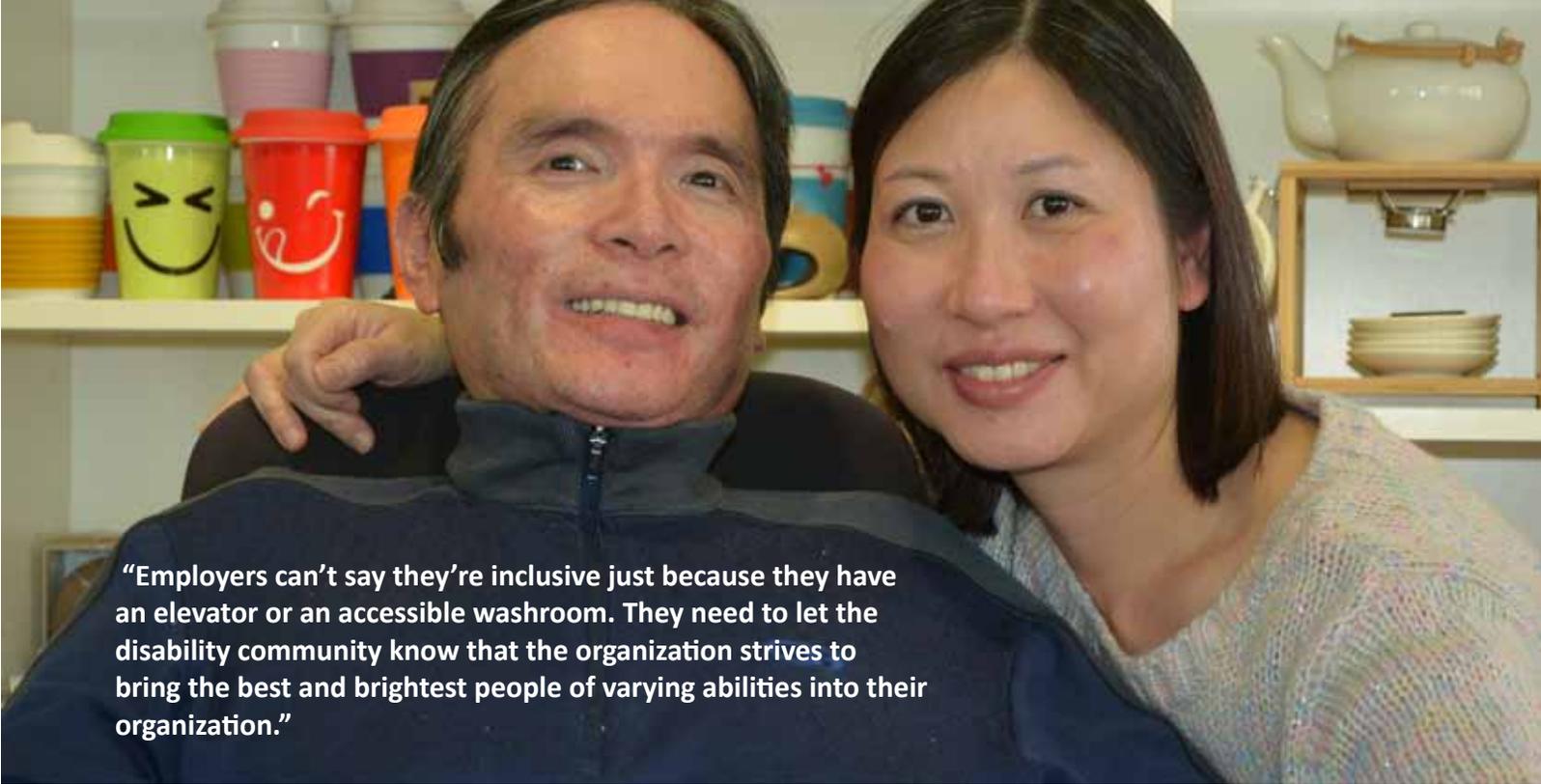
We realized that inclusion was about being willing to think outside the box and to be open-minded. Once you're willing to do that, you can think beyond the limited ideas of accessibility, like ramps and elevators.

Out of this process, MOSAIC now has a disability focus group that will help us in developing our strategic plan.

Our bureaucratic wheels took a while to turn, but Angelo was able to come to work for us. He started the Connecting Fathers parenting support group for our multicultural clients, some of whom also had a disability. He now runs our Men in Change program, a support and education group for men.

“MOSAIC really responded well,” Angelo said. “After I was working there a while, they could see there would be some problems. For example, I had to wait outside the building for someone to let me in. So, they asked me to do an accessibility audit.”

Angelo went through all the offices and rooms at the MOSAIC



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worksite, and made suggestions for accessibility improvements. “I checked the wheelchair space in bathrooms, how easy it was to navigate in staff offices. One office had a rug that got caught in my wheels, so they took that out. I’d love to see other employers ask staff with disabilities to do this kind of audit.”

When asked what employers need to know about empowering people with disabilities, Angelo said organizations need to have a statement about “disability” in their core values, so inclusion is incorporated through the organization’s programs, policies and work culture.

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Angelo’s biggest smile in the interview came when I asked him if he remembered when he first met his wife Catharine and when he fell in love with her. Catharine’s face turned pink to match the colour of her sweater.

“Whenever I am not clear or my inside feelings don’t match what is going on outside, I talk to Catharine and through that process, things start to become clear,” he said. When I asked him what support he needs to keep working, he said, “Catherine is my friend and my biggest support.”

For more information on MOSAIC, please visit www.mosaicbc.com. You can find information on the Men in Change program, under Family Programs.

NINU KANG IS DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT AT MOSAIC. 

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