

Bank-Mikkelsen Honorary Award Acceptance Speech

Erika Colon, Founder of White Hand Chorus NIPPON

(Please refer to the original text in Japanese for the definitive version)

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with deep gratitude that I accept this prestigious award today.

In truth, those who truly deserve this honor are the children of **White Hand Chorus NIPPON**, their parents, and all who support them – for they are the ones building and embodying the world that Bank-Mikkelsen envisioned. Today, on behalf of these children, our devoted staff who work alongside them each day, and our many supporters, I humbly and wholeheartedly receive this special recognition.

Bank-Mikkelsen once asked the world a simple but powerful question:

“Does every person not have the right to live an ordinary life?”

Today’s lecture by Mr. Hasse was deeply insightful, and I was equally moved by the warm, witty interpretations offered by Professor Chiba, and the introductions made by Prof. Fukushima, and Prof. Zenimoto. These talks deepened my understanding of what it means to live a “normal life.” They helped us reflect – on what it means to live as human beings, and what we seek from life, not as privilege, but as a right.

White Hand Chorus NIPPON is an inclusive choir that promotes **social inclusion through music**. The children who participate come from a wide range of backgrounds – deaf, hard of hearing, visually impaired, intellectually disabled, autistic, living with rare diseases, using wheelchairs, or not identified with any disability at all. Together, they form a unique ensemble: one group sings with sign language – **“Shuka”** – and another sings with their voices – **“Seitai”** – united on one stage.

This movement originated in Venezuela. It began for me with a single encounter with deaf people, and through that, a chain of transformative relationships followed. These encounters have helped many children, parents, and even myself to grow and evolve in profound ways.

Our daily rehearsals are humble. The administrative work and fundraising needed to sustain our activities are demanding. We sweat – literally and figuratively – every day. But what we have gained here is priceless. The lessons learned have

brought tears of joy, and this work has become a lifelong treasure. For this, I owe endless thanks to the children.

The future we seek cannot be built without the voices of these children.

A deaf child often faces walls of prejudice. A blind child encounters barriers embedded in society. When we listen to their stories, we realize how much we did not know – how much we must reflect on and change. At the same time, we must honor the wisdom and courage of those who have fought for decades to reclaim the basic rights of people with disabilities. In Japan, sign language was suppressed for more than 60 years. But this year, for the first time, the government enacted a **national law to promote sign language**. On behalf of our organization, I express my deep respect to Mr. Chiba, Mr. Sato, and others who have helped bring Bank-Mikkelsen's vision to Japan.

Receiving the Bank-Mikkelsen Honorary Award comes with responsibility – a responsibility to reflect on the future we are trying to build. If I may, I would like to share a part of our journey with the children.

(Video Presentation)

Through music – and through loving music alongside these children – I have regained my faith in humanity.

Since ancient times, music has served as a form of nonverbal communication that creates connection. And connection takes many forms: between people and the universe, between nature and humanity, between ourselves and the divine, between ourselves and others – and even between ourselves and our past or future. Through musical scores, we connect with the emotions of people long gone. Music carries love, sorrow, anger, and joy – all the movements between human hearts.

These connections belong to all people. Helen Keller once said:

“Blindness separates people from things. Deafness separates people from people.”

And yet, despite such challenges, each of us has the power to bridge what has been divided.

Children have the right to dream. While there are many people with disabilities who thrive in support facilities, a child's dreams often reach beyond those walls. Parents and teachers must believe that those dreams can be realized, one step at a time.

Let me share one story.

A deaf high school boy in our program once told his teacher that he dreamed of working at an international organization. His teacher replied, “You can’t hear – you won’t be able to pass the English proficiency exam. That dream is impossible.” (As a side note – there are now proper accommodations for deaf individuals in such exams.)

Still, he refused to give up. Like Beethoven, he pushed forward – and passed the exam. He later performed at our United Nations concert in Vienna, and is now working hard at university, aiming to work overseas. He once said,

“Before joining White Hand Chorus, no one ever asked for my opinion.”

That must change – everywhere.

Children have the right to express themselves. And we believe everyone should have the right to learn music.

I hope that one day, in every school in Japan, there will be white gloves in every music room – so children who cannot hear or speak can also join in singing. That would be “normal.” Because **music belongs to everyone.**

Bank-Mikkelsen once said:

“The greatest education for children is the experience of living together.”

“Normalization is the path to improving quality of life – a fight for freedom and choice.”

Today, we’ve spoken much from the perspective of people with disabilities. But as someone who has helped build inclusive environments, I want to emphasize:

Inclusion is not just for children with disabilities. It is a gift for all children.

It is not something people “without disabilities” must do for others. I hesitate to even use the phrase “without disabilities,” because our organization avoids the term “able-bodied.” Why? Because no one is “always” healthy or “always” capable. That word assumes a stability that no human truly has.¹

¹ In Japanese, the commonly used term for “able-bodied” is 健常者 (kenjōsha), which literally means “a person who is always healthy or normal.” However, our organization intentionally avoids using this word, as it implies a fixed state of physical and mental well-being that no human can sustain throughout life. Instead, we prefer expressions

Roughly 40% of the children in White Hand Chorus are officially categorized as “without disabilities.” But none of them live without needing help from others. Just as those labeled as “disabled” are not without power or strength. Every child offers part of their soul to another, and in that exchange, both children and adults grow.

Some children have faced academic pressure. Others carry the pain of divorce. Every one of them lives a life filled with both hardship and joy.

Let me share another story.

During one performance, a girl named “Ana” was guiding a blind peer, “Isa” . “Ana” overheard someone say, “That girl can’ t remember her position on stage – she’ s blind, after all.” “Ana” burst into tears and ran to me in anger:

“Why would they say something so cruel? She sings more perfectly than anyone. I will make absolutely sure she gets to the right place!”

“Ana” had come to share in “Isa” s pain. When I later called “Isa” ’ s mother, she replied:

“Oh, she didn’ t mind at all.”

“Isa” commutes to school by train, using a white cane, and often hears comments like, “She’ s disabled – don’ t stare.” But she lives her life with the attitude, “*I am me.*”

“Ana” ’ s mother later wrote me a heartfelt letter, saying:

“Since my daughter was born, I raised her by checking milestones – when she sat up, stood, spoke. Once she entered school, I constantly compared her to others – who was better at English, faster at swimming. I didn’ t realize I was raising a child with no self-confidence. But watching I- chan live with the attitude ‘*I am me*’ has taught us more than I could ever describe. In truth, it is we – parent and child – who were being guided.”

If “Ana” had never met “Isa” , her life might have taken a different path.

We are challenged to rethink the meaning of the word “*disability.*” Policies should be shaped by the voices of those who have lived the experience. As the Disability Rights slogan says:

that recognize the spectrum of needs and experiences every individual may have at different times in life, regardless of formal diagnoses or labels. This linguistic choice reflects our belief that no one is perpetually “whole” or independent and that interdependence is a natural, shared human condition.

“Nothing about us, without us.”

Yet even those considered “non-disabled” live with limitations. My mother-in-law suffers from advanced dementia. Her body is strong, but her mind no longer allows her to imagine others. As we age, none of us can avoid confronting the limitations of the body and the soul. No one escapes the ticking of time.

The world’s greatest art has come from people who, within those very limitations, have cried out for freedom with their souls.

It is within these limited lives that we search for meaning – and find joy, in connection.

That joy exists in the eyes of someone without sight. It shines in the soul of someone who cannot speak. That joy is dignity itself.

In Okinawa, a mother brought her daughter, who has a rare condition and couldn’t make eye contact or speak. During rehearsal, she paced the room in circles, repeating the same word. The other children and I simply kept practicing a song called *“Nijifry.”*

Though she didn’t join, the fact that she stayed in the room was a sign. She returned the next week. And again. By the third rehearsal, her repeated word had changed – she began saying *“Nijifry.”*

She wasn’t able to perform on the day of the concert due to illness, but during the encore, she suddenly appeared in the audience – and joined us on stage, singing every word by heart.

No one in the audience may have understood what that meant – but for us, it was the concert’s highlight.

The teachers, the children, the parents – everyone wept.

“Koto” sang with us!

Her joy was our joy.

Even if she couldn’t express it in words, through music, we experienced the joy of her soul – and it became ours.

This, I believe, is something often overlooked in support systems:

The **joy of mutual transformation** – not of giving or receiving alone.

The phrase “The greatest education is living together” teaches us something essential:

That joy shared is joy multiplied.

Who is inclusion really for?

In the future of normalization lies something greater – a path toward deeper human happiness. A key to our collective future.

In today’ s world, we see structural discrimination, political division, online hatred fueled by fear, and endless wars. Sometimes I can’ t sleep, wondering:

What kind of world will we leave for our children?

And then I remember a fossil – from 540,000 years ago – of a person born with a severe cranial disability who lived at least over 10 years. That person likely could not walk or gather food. And yet they survived. That means someone cared for them.

Human beings are built to care.

I imagine that, in that ancient person’ s eyes, there was joy. That between glances, there was connection. That they were not just “cared for,” but part of a relationship – where both gave and received.

In today’ s world, genetic screening may lead to termination of pregnancy based on fear or misunderstanding. In the future, gene editing may become commonplace. But no matter how far we go, **humans are imperfect by nature** – and perhaps because of that, we live through connection, and walk more humanly, more joyful paths.

Looking at the efforts in Denmark, I am reminded – we don’ t need to go back 540,000 years to find hope.

As in the lyrics of our song:

If you give me chances
If you let me grow, and if you let me be
If you see me, take me just the way I am
I can be free

We will continue striving to create the future – from the stage.

Our children embody the spirit of normalization – not as *duty*, but as *joy* and *freedom*.

I want the world to see that.

To the parents and children who feel something is “missing,” to the adults burdened by despair – I want them to see these children.

To those children still fighting in hospitals, or trapped in loneliness by misunderstanding and prejudice – I hope we can bring them what should be ordinary:

connection.

I am deeply encouraged to walk this path with all of you.

Together, let us keep fulfilling Bank-Mikkelsen’ s dream.

Thank you.