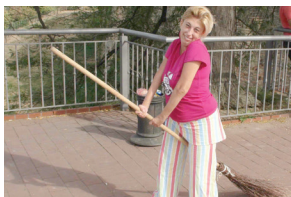
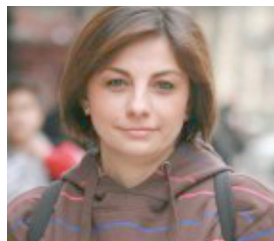


SVJETLANA TIMOTIĆ ■ MARIJANA ČANAK

# WOMEN CHANGING THE STATE OF REALITY



# **WOMEN CHANGING THE STATE OF REALITY**

NOVI SAD, 2018

Svjetlana Timotić and Marijana Čanak (Ed.)  
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## FOREWORD

History of women's movement is fragmentary, documented without continuity, with a lot of hidden places, erasure and rediscovery. Marginalized groups' campaigns have been key to changing people's perception of the world, yet their contribution easily slips into anonymity or becomes obliterated. Portraits of activist women with disabilities are mostly invisible within the anyway hidden histories, both those of the women's rights movement and the movement advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities. The contribution of women with disabilities remains somewhere in between, in a gap or at the intersection of gender and disability, clouded by layers of unacceptable diversity. Through a patriarchal lens, notions of disability and femininity intertwine to such an extent that they inevitably merge at a certain point.

Disability is contextual, sometimes obvious, at other times invisible. Sometimes it changes with a person's age. Disability is, beyond any doubt, a fluid identity category. A thousand or even several hundred years ago, visual impairment could have been a major existential factor. Wearing glasses not only stopped being a life-determining circumstance, but it became completely usual today. Glasses are often not associated with disability, but rather with matters of style or image of intellectuality. If a woman engaged in *serious reading* several centuries ago, she was likely to end up in an asylum for the mentally ill because such activity was *not appropriate for her gender*. To the extent nothing short of wearing trousers. Today, an image of a woman in trousers denotes nothing subversive, except in regions of the world where burka is the only appropriate denominator of femininity. Femininity, just like disability, is variable. In certain chronological

contexts and cultural constructs, being a woman meant having a congenital disability, for *women's bodies are weak, brains inadequate, ovaries determining*. Women, persons with disabilities and children used to share the same social status at cross-section of an era – the status of incompetence. Paradoxically enough, perceivable disability opened a way into the academia and social engagement beyond the kitchen to some women. Social expectations from a woman with a disability are different – supposing that she is not fit for the role of a wife and mother, the society *yields* other existential options to her. One repressive measure thus invalidates the other, opening traditionally male spaces to Mileva Marić, Rosa Luxemburg, Helen Keller...

Disability is an identity aspect significantly influencing a woman's life experience, yet centuries of suppositions, stereotypical perceptions, irrational fears and stigmatization – both that of disability and female gender – cloud the authenticity of that experience. Women with disabilities are often a topic of other people's writings, while their stories end up in extremes, from marginalization to becoming heroines and back. Without acknowledging the diversity of their character, the background of the seeming admiration is often nothing but pure pity devaluating the contribution of women with disabilities. A series of interviews with the Novi Sad women activists for the rights of persons with disabilities is a gallery of women's portraits *of those who keep changing our reality*. This collection of interviews does not only document a part of activism history of women with disabilities, but it creates a space for telling that history in authentic women's voices. These personal stories of women activists question also the gender aspect of the movement advocating for the right of persons with disabilities by asking: *who is the least equal among the unequal?* The experience of women activists with disability, on one hand, undermines a stereotypical image, presenting women with disabilities as the movement's power-bearers, change-initiators, strong and proactive. On the other, they keep working from the shadow, achieving their goals quietly and with no glory, remaining outside positions of power, insufficiently visible and indistinct. Their stories are an ac-

count of many names: those of their predecessors, women who introduced them to the movement, their women colleagues, co-workers, assistants, mentors and supporters, motivating them and pointing to the common goals... Any of those names dispersed across these stories could have been a valid reference for yet another chapter in the history of the movement or, quite the opposite, one of its unfathomable segments. So far, the history of activism of women with disabilities has largely been an oral one. Invisible beyond their own domain, these activist women keep memories of each other alive, respecting the synergy effect of their team efforts. Some of the interviews in this compilation appeared for the first time commemorating the passing of Lepojka Čarević Mitanovska, honoring her enthusiasm and work inspiring many a woman activist's spirit.

Women activists' inspiration, typically enough, comes from people and their interpersonal relationships, their fates in the broadest sense of the word and their own position among them. Some of the interviewed women are members of traditional associations of persons with disabilities; others are in NGOs or their own organizations. Recalling their first activist engagements, they tell a story of their own individual development, providing also an insight into a broader picture and a cross-section of the state of affairs within the movement. Without a tendency to measure achievements, just an incidental overview is enough to reflect on *what has changed in the image of the city, from the first project of the contemporary women activists with disabilities to the present*. Positioned on a timeline, each of the interviews begins with women activists' childhood recollections, ending with hints on what each of them would like to be remembered for. Based on their most personal accounts of how they used to imagine their present selves when they were little girls, we could debate if *women activists are born as such or they become (women) and/or activists later on*. Each of the interviewed women activists reveals her own success formula, irreplaceable ingredients of successful social action of each of them being passion for life, perseverance, patience and tolerance, pursuit of ideas, trust in people and responsibility, that



towards oneself and the others. For women with disabilities activism is a multi-layered category with multiple meanings. *Being a woman activist* might denote *bringing about a change, dealing with the inevitable, being optimistic, introducing balance, accomplishing a feat, putting knowledge into action, setting paths for the ones to come, doing what needs to be done, implementing an action leaving a trace, improving one's social environment, **giving yourself***.

Failing to recognize those who have *given themselves* before us is cutting ourselves off from strength, diminishing continuity of the change bringing us back to the starting points over and again. In order to know where we are heading, we must inevitably reflect on where we had come from in the first place and bear in mind that nothing that is happening to us is not for the first time – it has all happened to someone before us. By respecting our predecessors, we activate their qualities within ourselves, while by honoring their contribution we empower our own. This is why it is important to decode, record and remember the history of activism of women with disabilities.

Marijana Čanak and Svjetlana Timotić

NEZA ĐURKIĆ:

## *The Point is to Get Completely Involved*

PHYSICAL THERAPIST

MEMBER OF THE ASSEMBLY AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE  
CULTURE AND EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE CITY  
ORGANIZATION OF THE BLIND, NOVI SAD

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME...** When I was six, I lost my vision and it took my life in a different direction than the one I would have probably had otherwise. **I accept people the way they are** and I try to see something positive in everyone I meet. I have my children and grandchildren and they are all healthy, nice and positive people.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE an actress or a teacher.** I wanted to be an actress. We didn't have a TV back then, and I used to listen to radio dramas when I was a child. I loved the way the actors expressed themselves. I really wanted to become an actress, but I already knew back then, that it would be almost impossible to achieve. Since I was attending both primary school and music school, I wanted to play the piano and I could imagine myself as a music teacher one day. I thought I would teach children to play and love music. But that didn't happen. However, being a physical therapist is in many ways similar to being a teacher, because you need to talk to your patients, get into their problems, and provide instructions. So, being a physical thera-

pist turned out to be quite a good job for me.

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED BY the need to advance** and make progress, to bring out something new and to achieve more than I have so far. Successful people inspire me, people whose achievements encourage me to better myself even more.

**TO ME ACTIVISM IS when you yourself give to a community everything necessary that would help people live better,** manage easier and make more progress. I am especially interested in cultural happenings and events and I have contributed a lot in these fields. I organized our drama and music groups. I wanted us to do performances where we would transmit our good mood and optimism to the audience. **The point is to get involved and to provide others all the assistance they need to live better lives.**

**HOW I GOT ENGAGED IN THE ASSOCIATIONS' WORK?** It happened when I finished high school and was looking **for support while looking for a job.** The support came through the Associations of the Blind of Vojvodina and the Association in Zrenjanin, because there was a vacancy for a physical therapist at the Institute of Paraplegia and Hemiplegia in a nearby Rusanda Spa. A few of us were interviewed, but only men were chosen. The reason for this was that there was an earthquake in Banja Luka, where a lot of male physical therapists were working. Since they lost their jobs they were given priority. However, one of them went to work in Libya and I took over his job. I became active in the Association while I was working.

My first duties in the Association were related to **sports activities.** I was doing athletics in high school. We learned about these sports activities through the Association of the Blind, but back then I wasn't interested in either their work or the work of any other association. They would simply invite me to competitions. I would show up and was very successful at them. At the same time, it provided me with an opportunity to meet the community of the blind people outside my

school. We were far more active than today's generations. I even feel a bit nostalgic when I think of those days.

Later, when I finished my education and got a job, I was first a member of *the conference*, or *the board* – as that was the former name of the assembly. They noticed me because, during those meetings and discussions, I was very active suggesting what we could do in order to improve our lives. Thanks to that, I was being appointed for executive functions. I was engaged in work with people who became blind later in their life because they would quite often feel disappointed in life; they would feel lost and depressed. They definitely needed support. I was also involved in work with parents who had blind children. Those parents quite often overprotect their children and do everything instead of them. **By doing so, they deprive their children of the capacity for leading an independent life. The parents don't do it out of bad intentions, but out of pure ignorance.** These two areas were my primary fields of work, but I was also making an effort to prove our work in wider environment. The prejudices are huge and people outside our community need to be informed about abilities of the people with disabilities. I have never referred only to the blind people, but also to the people with physical disabilities. Being a physical therapist, I could very well understand what they were going through. My view on the topic of disability and the disability movement has always been a broad one.

**I AM MOST PROUD OF my health.** I am grateful that I am healthy. I pay attention to what I eat, I move a lot and I am physically very active. I am proud of my children and a big circle of friends. I am not sitting isolated in a dark corner of my room all alone, but I really am active and I spend my time with a great number of people. On the anniversaries of the Association and the City Organization of the Blind I was given many recognition plaques for my overall dedication, yet to me **the most beautiful thing was that my childhood wish to become an actress partially came true while working in the Organization.** We made plays that I took part in and I feel very grateful that

I was given the opportunity to act on a real stage and in a real theatre! That was an old wish coming true.

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS IS adaptability and the fact that I am not shy**, but open for discussion and cooperation. I am also an inquisitive person. I always want to know: 'How would I do this if it were me?' I get involved in things to see how they would turn out if I did them.

**UNLIKE MEN, WOMEN are still neglected no matter how hard they are trying.** This is a men's world and it is also reflected in the associations. In our Associations, a woman is rarely chosen on a higher, more important position. It only happens when there aren't any available men or when none of them wants the post. The male prejudices rule: a blind man won't be very keen on marrying a blind woman although they share the same experience! I find that really surprising and unacceptable. It's much harder for women, both in professional and personal life. Women are more active than men in my association, in the sense that they attend meetings more and spend more time together. They are not on higher positions and are involved in the activities that are less important from the Association's functioning point of view, but they are very important for life in general. During the previous mandate, I was the President of our association and, being quite strict and demanding, I made some enemies. Nobody likes to be told: 'Hey, do this differently because this approach doesn't work!' I didn't want the second mandate because I didn't want to keep making an extra effort when only few people wanted to do *the real thing*. So what is the real thing? The real thing for the Association is to work on projects in order to obtain financial means for further activities! People like to beat about the bush, whereas I am precise and strict, which doesn't make me very popular. The intolerance is there: it's based on gender, nationality or disability. It's there and I felt it.

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH** the Novi Sad Dystrophy Association of South Bačka District. We

were working together on realisation of cultural activities; our drama group took part in some of their activities. There are nine organizations joined together on the city level. They are part of the Coordination Board, where the representatives of the Dystrophy Association and the Association of Paraplegics are the most active ones. These are the associations that we cooperate with nicely because they know the common problems and **we act as one when we address the City authorities.**

**IN THE NEXT YEAR I AM DETERMINED TO** raise the activities of Culture and Education Commission to a higher level, because these activities were neglected while I was the president of the Organization. I am also thinking about finding a play director and a monodrama and take part in the Festival of the Blind People that takes place next year. This festival is organized in Zagreb, Croatia, every second year. **I wish I could be an actress one more time. I wish I could do it again, because acting is something that I really love!** Although I am not that young anymore, my memory serves me. I don't have any special ambitions: **everything should follow its own natural course.** The most important thing is to preserve your health. I am determined to stay active: I read, spend time with my friends, go to the theatre, go to dance parties, etc.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED AS** being a sincere friend, a friend who always means well no matter if I argue or laugh.

LJILJANA ČAKMAK:

## *It's Quite Normal That I'm Active*

HIGH SCHOOL DEGREE HYDRO TECHNICIAN

MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE PROGRAM  
COUNCIL, ACTIVE IN THE ŽIVETI USPRAVNO  
(LIVING UPRIGHT) CENTER, EX-MEMBER OF  
THE MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS ASSOCIATION

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME** are that I'm communicative, always in a good mood, very social.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE** a hairdresser. I loved to comb people's hair. Usually girls would like to be actresses or singers; I wanted to be a hairdresser! I remember how, as a little boy, my cousin wanted to be a coach driver and as an adult he became a violinist! I wasn't drawn to the idea of hairstyling for long. I learned how to read and write by myself pretty early, so the main entertainment I found was in books. While other children used to go to bed with toys, I did it with books. I love painting and drawing and what I have always really wanted, yet have never achieved it, is to be **a painter**. At that time Art School was a notorious one and about to be closed down. My father was a director with the *Builders Association*; *he tried to persuade me to become an architect: 'You can draw there too!'* When I went to get my medical certificate for high school, I met a girl who asked me: *'Where are you going to enroll into?'* *'Art School,' I replied. 'What? Are you crazy? I am a student there and...'* she told me all the worst about the Art School. Enrollment was the next day, I was in a car with my dad and he asked me: *'So, where to?'* *'Let's go to the Construc-*

*tion School*, 'I replied. Architecture was what I had in mind. However, when we were supposed to have practice during the summer break, a friend of mine invited me to *Dunav-Tisa*, where I got interested in hydrotechnics. I gave up the architecture course and went to a hydro course instead, but I continued to draw and paint for myself...

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED BY** something that just happens in a moment. Sometimes plans don't come to be; sometimes they go awry and then things do happen when they are supposed to. I can't understand how some people get bored. When computers became available, they were very interesting to me, even though I couldn't use my hands by then. When Tanja Obradović ex Lazor was writing a project for the Resource Center for People With Disabilities within the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation, I came across a company named Lifetool which deals with adapting computer technology to people with disabilities. Tanja told me: '*I've got something for you! **You don't even need your hands to use this computer!***' Soon I learned how to work with a mouse that I controlled with my mouth, the one I use even today. Earlier, before I even had a computer, my dad was my personal assistant and he used a typewriter to type texts I wrote for the *Naš most (Our Bridge)* magazine. **When I got my computer and an opportunity to write by myself – no one was as good as me.** I can't imagine my life without a computer.

**TO ME ACTIVISM IS a desire to improve myself and my environment.** It means to make yourself and people around you feel better, which is possible only if they are satisfied and independent, and if they are doing the things they love. My goal is for people around me to be in good mood and to keep everything in line.

**HOW I GOT ENGAGED IN ASSOCIATIONS' WORK?** Ever since 1979 my exact medical diagnosis is still unknown, but it no longer bothers me. I used to think that, if I knew what it was, I could get proper treatment. However, things got worse and **I was sick of being treated as an ill person, because I didn't feel ill at all – neither**



**do I feel like it today.** I've been active all my life. In addition to my official job, I worked in the Music Youth of Novi Sad and on Zmajevе dečije igre children's festival, I sang in a choir – **every field of culture was important to me.** Once I got the status of a person with a disability, the most difficult thing for me was that people stopped treating me as a person – you no longer have any influence on your own life, but you are (perceived as) passive and I couldn't take it. From the very beginning I had difficulties accepting the wheelchair. I remember reading something, and then I suddenly looked out of the window, outside the sun was shining, the weather was beautiful – and I thought to myself: *'God, Ljilja, is this how it's going to be from now on, like you're in prison!'* I rang my sister: *'Come over, let's go for a walk!'* *'How are we going to do that?'* she asked. *'I'll be in my wheelchair.'* And that's how I started to use the wheelchair, **because I wanted to lead a normal life given the circumstances.**

I read about the foundation of the Multiple Sclerosis Association and, since that was one of possible diagnoses of my condition, I decided to join the association and see what was going on there. When I went to a meetings there was small talk, some were complaining while drinking coffee, while others were consoling them. **I, of course, didn't like it, so I decided to change the situation.** I started organizing literary and musical evenings, lectures, trips, tours of our own city, pilgrimages, visits of actors and visits to the theatre. I was in charge of cultural contents of the Association's activities, which became my main priority. I started organizing weekly events, but everyone started complaining about it: *'It's too much!'* I reduced the events to every other week and I kept that continuity for several years. Then, in 2000, the Živeti uspravno (Living upright) Center was founded and I found them interesting. When they contacted me, **it turned out that people with opinions similar to mine worked there.** I joined them and worked on the same things I did before, because I was always interested in culture and I liked being part of it. For a while, within the Živeti uspravno (Living upright) Center, I held music workshops in the premises of the *Sunce (Sun)* Association of Citizens with Cerebral

Palsy and Polio. I never went back to the *Multis* Multiple Sclerosis Association because it developed in the direction that wasn't interesting to me anymore.

The lack of assistance has been a constant problem for me – because I have a hundred percent disability. I'm in need of round-the-clock assistance. My parents helped, my sister, too, until she got married, later my nieces and some of my friends – but there was never enough people. At the time, I had volunteers from the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation, who really ment a lot to me, because I was no longer completely dependent on my family and friends. Although I had already used personal assistance in a certain way, it was only then that I had become aware of the concept and realized its significance. That is when the struggle for launching a personal assistance service began and I also became engaged in it. When the French humanitarian organisation Handicap International, which founded the Assosiation, withdrew – a couple of us founded the Živeti uspravno (Living up-right) Center. At first, the Center developed in our rooms and heads, the actual office space was to come later. The project of personal assistance as a service was written by **Milica Mima Ružičić Novković** in 2008 and sometime later my function was to organize this service and provide the money we needed. The financial problems with the assistance were becoming more pronounced, and almost a complete breakdown occurred in November of 2014. The work continued in 2015 and it still lasts, but to a significantly reduced extent. Lack of assistance is like house arrest: it barely meets the biological minimum. For this reason, I'm less active.

**I AM MOST PROUD OF** my friends and family and that I'm active in different fields. **For me it's quite normal that I'm active and engaged. To say that I am proud of it would be stupid, because I feel it is my need.** The worst would be if I'd be forbidden to do something!

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS**

IS the will. Some people say that it is persistence, but the essence is that you have the will to create, work, live.

**UNLIKE MEN, WOMEN are paid less for the same amount of work.** I can't stand the many inequalities between women and men, which is a matter of patriarchal heritage and upbringing. I have always been bothered by any kind of injustice that I had to deal with somehow. I always felt the need to defend someone from something. Given that my profession was male-dominated, I had to prove myself constantly and to fight to be at least treated equally. When I got the job, I had to do the fieldwork occasionally, where I had a double handicap: I was a woman and I was young! I used to be surrounded by people who were the age of my father or grandfather. **Whatever I said to them, it had no meaning – no one heard me until I started cursing.** When I tried to be polite, they ignored me; when I shouted orders in a stream of expletives, it was received with approval. *'That's it, you're one of the guys! Just say what you need!'* I've never understood that, although I found a common language with the workers and they accepted me.

According to some statistics, there are over 60 percent of young women in the Multiple Sclerosis Association, and the president is – of course – a man. **I immediately began to mess with their business!** A city association was organized, where women were in managerial positions, because I only proposed women, and the others accepted it because it was convenient for them.

When I used to work there, they would tell me: *'You're a feminist!'* I don't think I am, I just want people to be equal. Biology aside, everyone needs to accept their share of responsibility. I never really wanted to be in charge, I don't have that kind of ambition – I just want equality in interpersonal relations, partnerships, organizations, anywhere.

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH cultural organizations and musicians, with whom I have great**

**communication.** The more the people participate in something, the harder it is. A person who has the driving force must be ready to find people who think alike and are willing to work. If you are an organizer, you need to know who likes to do what and to delegate jobs accordingly. It's like playing a musical instrument – the work must be harmonious, so that people work with pleasure. In teamwork, it is important to maintain good mood and direction towards the same goal. You have to find a good team of content people. I'm disappointed in the associations of people with disabilities because there is a great standstill and envy there, which is depressing. Dividing people according to diagnosis is so stupid and meaningless – we make an average of 10 percent of the population. If that 10 percent turned toward the same goal, everything would be more accessible and faster – I don't understand how no one has still figured this out.

**IN THE NEXT YEAR I AM DETERMINED TO get the city to start budgeting for personal assistance services.** According to some estimates, there are about 40 potential users in Novi Sad. Assistance is intended primarily for people who are active, people who have stopped acting sick and acting as young children, those who are willing to work or study. Personal assistance is my primary wish and goal. Legally, all conditions have been met a long time ago. Last year, the head of the mayor's office told me that I had *occupied the City Hall*. The reason was to fight for the salary for personal assistants, who have waited for it for half a year. I know so many people who are in dire need of personal assistance and all we get are empty promises. I'm sure that if more organizations made joint pressure, there would be far more success.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED AS a good person,** someone who contributed to making others feel good and in whose presence everyone felt good.

TATJANA STOJŠIĆ PETKOVIĆ:

## *Trusting Others Underpins my Faith in Myself*

PSYCHOLOGIST AND LAUGHTER YOGA LEADER

FREELANCE ACTIVIST FOR THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES. LEADER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKSHOPS AND LAUGHTER YOGA CLASSES IN THE ...IZ KRUGA - VOJVODINA (OUT OF THE CYCLE - VOJVODINA) ORGANIZATION AND THE VERA, LJUBAV, NADA (FAITH, LOVE, HOPE) ASSOCIATION

SHE IS ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE ŽIVETI USPRAVNO (LIVING UPRIGHT) CENTER

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME ARE** that I'm a woman. I love my job. I love my children, my husband, nature and... all animals.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE...** Well.... Let's say a doctor. As a little girl I was always a doctor in every game I've ever played. When someone got hurt while playing, I would always try to help, to dress the wounds and give advice about the treatment. Sometime at the age of twelve or thirteen, I made a decision, out of the blue, to become a psychologist. I don't remember meeting a psychologist at the time, reading a book about it, or watching a movie that would give me this idea. To this day, this idea is a part of me. I have always been attracted to helping professions and the issue of health in a wider sense of the

word. I never liked to deal with the cash desk, not even as a kid, and certainly not now.

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED BY** interpersonal relations, because they are always so unpredictable. It is impossible to predict with certainty how people will communicate, whom will they like or dislike. No matter how good you think you know someone, there is always something unpredictable about this person. I am inspired by joy, as a part of us, and not as something that comes from outside. Smile, of course, as a visible manifestation of joy. Love for animals and plants inspire me.

**TO ME ACTIVISM IS** a balance between wishes, dreams and real possibilities. In order for activism to have an effect, it is necessary to set and keep high goals, while, at the same time, having a firm foothold in reality and being tolerant. In a world approving of aggression, activism sounds more like a fight. I can't stand that word! Activism is not a fight, but fully investing yourself, a possibility of support, merging. Within the movement of people with disabilities activism is largely discordant, focusing on obstacles and shortcomings – as if we were poking each others in the eyes. We need tolerant activists. Tolerance is not a lack of an authentic attitude or self-respect, tolerance is being comprehensive. I am concerned when it comes to activism in the field of education, because we are increasingly hearing about inclusion not being good. What nobody really sees is that inclusion has shown how many children with disabilities are around us.

**HOW I GOT ENGAGED IN THE ASSOCIATIONS?** I remember the period of my studies as a rather ugly and difficult time of my life, because I was somehow left to myself and I missed the group dynamics I was accustomed to at school. At that time, it was difficult for me to seek support and assistance, whether it was because of the architectural barriers or something else. At faculty, I met Atila Besedeš, a paraplegic, who studied journalism and was already active, and who literally hounded me expecting me to get more engaged. Together,

we discovered a lot of literature on people with disabilities. At the same time, I met Miroslav Homa and Zlatko Mujević, young active paraplegic guys, who tried to get me involved with the Association of Paraplegics. Yet, apart from some informal gatherings and sports activities, I didn't like how the Association functioned. Frequent consumption of alcohol, malversations (both visible and invisible), and conflicts at meetings – I didn't want to be a part of that. I found my first engagement in the journal of the Union of Paraplegics of Vojvodina *Naš Put (Our Way)*, where I talked about sexuality.

When I started working in the Home for Children and Youth with Developmental Disabilities in Veternik, I neglected that kind of engagement, but a couple of years later I was noticed by representatives of the French humanitarian organization Handicap International and they suggested that I begin running workshops with people with disabilities. I attended a workshop delivery training course and – I literally realized a lifelong dream! I had complete freedom in organizing workshops, I often traveled – because we did a series of seminars in Serbia – and others wrote working reports. My workshops were actually an introduction to fundraising, because the funds themselves didn't mean much if the person leading an organization had a lack of confidence. There was a need for psychological support and empowerment of leaders among people with disabilities. In the workshops, we dealt with topics of accepting ourselves and getting to know others through psychological games; in essence, a work to develop tolerance. I also led summer schools for young people with disabilities in order to support them to continue their education. In the beginning, we worked with high school and university students, and later with young people who were active, but were not in leadership positions in organizations. Generally speaking, at the time there were barely any young people in organizations and associations of people with disabilities.

After a year and a half of my workshop engagement, a project was launched to establish a counseling center for psycho-social support

for people with disabilities. They saw me as a person who could be in charge of such counseling in Novi Sad. Again, I had the freedom to recruit a team that would attend a training of the Institute for Mental Health in Belgrade and other programs of non-governmental organizations (the *Most* Group was included, as well as the 484 Group). After this one-year education I became the first president of the *Živeti uspravno* (Living Upright) Counseling (later Center) in Novi Sad. There were five such counseling centers in Serbia: in Belgrade, Zaječar, Novi Pazar, Valjevo and Novi Sad. So, I began dealing actively with people with disabilities.

**I AM MOST PROUD** of summer schools that I led, of the work at the Home for Children and Youth with Developmental Disabilities in Veternik, of laughter workshops that I manage to do with people with disabilities. I am proud of being a member of the ISON choir, even though I'm tone deaf. I'm proud of the time I spent in Šajkaš, where I learned about therapeutic riding. Of course, I am proud of my family in general.

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS** IS that I believe in people. I believe that, if you trust them, people will respond with trust. Of course, I got bruised a few times in my life, but that didn't interfere with my faith in people. I'm horrified by the distrust and the way of thinking where everyone opposes everything. I don't believe in fights and rivalry, nor do I believe that anything goes well if you are forced to do it. I believe in communion and its light and natural flow. This trust in other people supports the faith in myself.

**UNLIKE MEN, WOMEN IN ASSOCIATIONS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES** are mostly invisible, they work hard from behind the scene and they are rarely in the presidential positions. Perhaps in organizations of people with multiple sclerosis women are more active and dominant, simply because women more often suffer from multiple sclerosis. Paraplegics' associations are predominantly male.



That's a picture of traditional associations, while in the non-governmental sector women with disabilities are more active, they are visible as founders and leaders of their own organizations. It is a fundamental problem that the state doesn't recognize women with disabilities as a category that needs additional support – not just in maternity issues – but generally in issues of violence and family relationships, education and separation from home, independent life.

#### **MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH**

Olivera Radovanović, my laughter yoga teacher, who once was my personal assistant. A sociologist Gradimir Zajić had a positive influence on me, who, by working in Handicap International, recognized that for the best results I needed freedom of creativity. The team at the Living Upright was very inspiring and important for me: Maja Šajfar (Radojčević), Božana Injac, Tanja Lazor, Zdenka Bjelanović, Katarina Drobac, Miško Šekularac. We did a lot of things together and we easily recognized each other's role – which is crucial for the efficiency of a team. Now I work very successfully with Miodrag Miša Blizanac and Maja Dunović, who lead the ISON choir, as well as with Svjetlana Timotić who is the frontwoman of the... *IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA* organization. I hope that they also think they are successfully cooperating with me, too.

**IN THE NEXT YEAR I AM DETERMINED TO** get more resources to realize my dreams, to continue the workshops I lead and to contribute to achieving more accessibility when it comes to architectural and social barriers for people with disabilities and for animals. My desire is not to stop believing that the change is possible.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED BY** my children and by my smile which makes them so happy.

SVJETLANA TIMOTIĆ:

## *I'm Not a Part of the System*

SERBIAN LITERATURE TEACHER (BA)

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ... IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA,  
ORGANIZATION PROVIDING SUPPORT TO WOMEN WITH  
DISABILITIES

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME** are wit, tolerance and aikido.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE** a teacher – while playing I had often made my own school – or a lawyer, or none of it. When I enrolled in the Law High School in Sarajevo, it turned out that law wasn't for me, that others had just seen me as a lawyer because of my big mouth. During my schooling, I realized that I wasn't cut out for work in education either. Maybe I'd be good at it, but my professional interest went the other way. In education, I wouldn't be able to find the issue I would like to advocate for. Besides, I do not trust the current educational system. During my studies and traineeship, I was not engaged in the movement and I had completely different attitudes about employment and work of people with disabilities, so I wondered if I could physically do it. When I became an activist, I wanted to stay in it, and I didn't feel that I should return to my profession. The calling is something that you feel inside. Had I felt that my calling was really in education, I would have been in it. Neither a distorted system of values nor anything else would have been a sufficient reason for me to give up my primary calling. I simply followed my gut feeling, which

I'm usually guided by, not just logic. I never give up that feeling.

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED BY** the need to change something. Inspiration comes from within, and I tend to be supportive of other people, which is expressed in different ways. Lately, I often remember my professor from high school. When I told her that I wanted to do social work, she asked me: 'To constantly deal with other people's problems? Why would you want to do that?!' I always stood out in Serbo-Croatian (mother tongue) classes, so studying literature seemed to make sense at the time. After my studies, I went back to dealing with social issues, but who knows what I would have really been like had I studied it. This is why my dealing with social issues is different from the way it is done in the welfare centers.

**TO ME ACTIVISM IS** the path towards introducing social change. Each one of us sees a change she or he supports with her or his whole being, and activism is the way to achieve it. This path is clear to me, but in order to arrive at something, it is inevitable to adapt and change ourselves. Activism is about giving yourself to others, sharing and understanding. Once you enter activism, you no longer think about what an activist is, you simply approach it and do it. Maybe in that case activism turns into something else – into professionalism. If due to my physical difficulties I can't always go out into the street, to protest and be active in that sense – I can always find my own way of doing it. What's important to me is that I'm not a part of the system.

**HOW I GOT ENGAGED IN ASSOCIATIONS AND HOW WAS THE ORGANIZATION...IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA ESTABLISHED?** I spent half of my life in Sarajevo, where I'd say to myself: 'You are "normal"!'. I graduated from regular schools (both primary and secondary). My social circle consisted of people without disabilities, and I only met persons with disabilities in spas. When it was about the benefits that people with disabilities were entitled to, I was adamant that I didn't need them. It was clear to me that I lived a 'normal' life and didn't differ from other 'normal' people – which in fact

questioned how much I accepted myself and my life with disabilities. We lived a normal life and no one in my family insisted on joining the association, because my education went smoothly – they never refused me during enrollment – so there was no need for getting support from an association. We were sure that we could do it all by ourselves. When I arrived to Novi Sad, I found myself in a special situation – I was no longer in my hometown where I could do everything. Even then, I still didn't think about associations and organizations, nor was I especially interested in them. I was preoccupied with other things: my parents were in Sarajevo, there was war. I was happy to continue my studies, I lived in a student's home and I had so much to catch up with. I remember that Milica Mima Ružičić once sent my roommate to invite me to the then Association of Students with Handicap (today's Association of Students with Disabilities). The association was at its start, and it was okay to invite everyone you knew to engage. My first reaction was resistance: *'You just do it, I don't need that!'* It was not a radical resistance, in fact, I was interested in following what was happening in the Association from a distance. I was fortunate enough to finally get to know the work of an association that wasn't traditional, rather a non-governmental organization. When I found out that working in associations that bring together people with disabilities didn't have to come down to pitying them and collecting aid, all the doubts I had about it were gone. The moment I felt that I needed and could give myself, I joined the Association. It wasn't that important whether we were disabled or not, but to work for an idea, to achieve important changes in the community. In the Students' Association, I wasn't in the leading position, but I had positioned myself, I was someone who maintained an office in function, responsible for organizational issues. Working in the Association enabled me to become familiar with the literature, basic definitions, models and terminology of disability. What particularly attracted me to the library were the two brochures published by the Center for Independent Living, which talked about the double discrimination of women with disabilities and a little about sexuality. The connection between women and disability, mentioned very rarely, intrigued me more and

more. In the context of my profession, the language of disability was important to me, and all of that introduced a new dimension in my dealing with literary work. Everything I never thought about before started to light up. Yet, the essence of my interest was women with disabilities. On behalf of the Živeti uspravno (*Living Upright*) Center, I participated in a seminar organized by Lepojka Čarević Mitanovska. Her idea was to create a network of organizations that would address issues of violence against women and support them by means of a helpline. There was no possibility within the Center for such work, so I took to establishing a new organization. Somehow, one thing led to another and, without skipping steps, I've come to a point where I can really give myself. In March 2007, the ... *IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA* Organization was established – it was exactly what I wanted and what still goes on...

**I AM MOST PROUD OF** the choices of the people I worked with. Over the past decade, many women have gone through the Organization. Each one of them had a certain role at a certain point in time and each was important. I always had the feeling that I was with real women, I knew how to choose associates. I am very proud that there is an organization dealing with such important issues and I am proud of the values the Organization supports.

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONES CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS ARE** tolerance and patience. I can understand why something is happening – whether I like it or not – without hasty judgement. Although it may sometimes seem that I made a wrong judgement, I always take time, instead of bringing the final judgments right away. When it comes to this organization, we went step by step, I never thought that we had to be somewhere right away, at any cost. There was a certain dynamic. In the most difficult moments, we knew how to be patient. Before establishing...*IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA*, I was in two organizations that had already had some credibility and in which we had everything: technical equipment, contacts, a team. Then we were supposed to start from scratch, from a point where you had nothing! It

was not easy to get used to the situation. Regardless of your previous experience, dedication and investment, you're back to square one. Patience and gradation took us where we are. Through all these processes, we learned about ourselves and changed for the better.

**UNLIKE MEN, WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES...** Many times people have asked me: *'Does it matter if you are a man or a woman with disabilities? As if someone sees any difference now!'* My goal is to make them learn the difference and no longer wonder about what is different in this case. There is a clear difference between being a woman with a disability and being a man with a disability. While establishing the organization, something in me knew it, but only through further work did I grow aware that it was distribution of social power. I was neither sufficiently mature at the very beginning, nor did I understand that the organization strives for feminist principles. I knew that women's issues were my main interest, although it may not even be evident in the founding document of the organization. While creating a women's organization, my first support was a man, Marko Mirković, who learned about feminism throughout the process. The situation has been really special ever since. Traditional associations already have a stable system; they are supported, they have their membership, their own history. A women's organization deviates from such a tradition. It has always been a problem to present this topic, which is important, in a way for others to perceive it as such. The ...*IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA* Organization is fully oriented towards women with disabilities and all services are intended for women. Men with disabilities have their opportunity in all other associations, so it is clear why we are exclusive. Only legal aid and info center, by chance, are open to everyone, and this is the only compromise. By strengthening the organization, services are increasingly being focused on women.

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH** women's organizations. Solidarity and direction toward the same goal is to be felt, the principles behind which I stand are fostered just by

the fact that we have entered the women's movement. That is why partnerships and memberships with SOS Vojvodina Network and the Women's Network against Violence are important to us.

**IN THE NEXT YEAR I AM DETERMINED** To make the Disability Portal an even more authentic and popular media. Through these interviews, as well as by documenting parts of history concerning the activist contribution of women with disabilities, I would like us to realize that our strength is in being connected and united. It is important that people know what we are doing, that we are active members of this society, and that we contribute to this city in different ways. In the coming year this could be even more apparent and the community can count on us. Next year, we will celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Organization, which should be done properly.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED BY** something that is yet to come!

DRAGANA GVOZDENOVIĆ:

## *A Drop of Humankind*

BUSINESS HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE

FOUNDER AND COORDINATOR OF THE KAP (A DROP) CITIZENS' ASSOCIATION DEALING WITH DISABILITY ISSUES, MEMBER OF THE SUNCE (THE SUN) CITIZENS' ASSOCIATION FOR CEREBRAL PALSY AND POLIO IN THE SOUTH BAČKA DISTRICT IN NOVI SAD, ACTIVE IN THE YOUTH OFFICE OF TEMERIN MINICIPALITY

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME:** Just as Calimero, wherever I am, I always seek justice. Superficiality and ill-treatment of people bother me, I can't stand to see people being neglected and pushed aside. Then I'm ready to fight, especially for others, not only for myself. Justice first! In the past 33 years of my life I've always been having health issues. I've spent my youth in hospitals and spas. Although I don't like to talk or brag about myself, I'd still say I'm a fighter. **I was born in the wrong body, but I battle** with the one I have. I always joke – actually, it's not a joke – that I should have been a man, because I don't have many women's characteristics.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE a teacher,** because I love children and I've had this idea for a long time. Even today, I love working with them. A friend of mine runs a kindergarten and I'm often over there helping her. I just love sitting and watching them. It's never boring with children. My wish used to be to graduate from Textile High School and then start the Fashion Design Faculty in Zagreb.



But my parents didn't like the idea. They said: '*Don't go to the Textile High, there's a lot of dust there and you're ill...*' They diverted me to the Business High School, which I, today, refer to as the *Futile High School*. I don't blame them though, all parents, no matter what they do, do it with the best intent. Lately, I've been attracted to delivering workshops. On several occasions, I conducted workshops with the topic of proper approach to and understanding of disability, which I found really fulfilling. I would like to share every experience that I have gained in the Associations of Novi Sad with the people of Temerin. I am cooperating with the Temerin Local Inclusive Network related to the topic of personal assistance to children, which is becoming more and more an issue. And on that note, I would like to work with the parents of children with disabilities. Due to their own fear, parents overprotect their children without realizing they need to let them go – for their mutual benefit. There, I got right back to working with and for children.

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED** by music, movies and creative work. Movies: *Front of the Class*, *Freedom Writers*, *Temple Grandin*. I'm especially fascinated by *Temple Grandin*. How to find in every person with autism that what was found in her? Song: *What a Wonderful World*. Arts and crafts and decoration: decoupage, painting on glass, beadwork, making jewellery, various types of knitting...

**TO ME ACTIVISM IS change.** It doesn't have to be a change from the roots, but an improvement. **A kind of action that leaves a trace.**

**HOW I GOT INVOLVED IN ASSOCIATIONS' WORK...** Up until 2002, I didn't even know that organizations for people with disabilities existed. That year, I changed the left hook prosthesis and I thought I would be able to drive a bike afterwards. During rehabilitation, my therapists said that wouldn't be possible with artificial hips and – I fell into depression. I don't even know where this bike idea came from, or why it was so important to me at the time... However, it turned out that right before me, **Tatjana Stojšić Petković** was

at the same place in rehabilitation. Tanja has always spread positive and different stories about people with disabilities. My therapist recalled how Tanja told her about the Živeti uspravno (Living Upright) Center, and she instructed me to go there, which I did. That's where I met Tanja, who would later take me to the Association of Students with Handicap. I remember I was on duty there throughout all June term, while students took exams. In 2002, I participated in a summer camp in Bečej, which was organized with the support of the French Organization Handicap International. That's when I first came across the information about the rights of people with disabilities, disability models, and terminology. A year or two later I attended a number of educational workshops at the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities: English courses, assertive training workshops, handicrafts. At the time, I was involved in organizational affairs, working with their other beneficiaries, writing articles for the *Novi Linker (the New Linker)* magazine. At one point, there was an Association for Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Temerin, which was founded by the mother of two girls with disabilities, but as that family later moved to Novi Sad, the association stopped its work. I saw the vacant space and with my friend Tatjana Srdić, a psychologist, decided to start a new organization. We founded the Kap (A Drop) Citizens' Association six years ago. It deals with human rights and humanitarian projects. The name of the association is my idea, after Dobriša Cesarić's poem:

### Waterfall

*A waterfall flows, and flows and flows;  
What does my little drop mean to it?*

*Look, a rainbow appears in the water,  
And it shines, and shimmers in thousand colours.*

*My little drop helps to create,  
That dream in the waterfall and makes it shine.*

*Quietly, oh so quietly autumn speaks to me  
Quietly, oh so quietly autumn speaks to me:  
With rustling leaves and whispering rain.*

*Still, the winter speaks even more quietly.  
And when it snows and darkness descends,  
In snowflakes the silence is alone.*

**A waterfall flows, and flows and flows;/ What does my little drop mean to it?** People with disabilities are just a small drop of humanity. Not only does *Kap (A Drop)* work with people with disabilities, we also organize inclusive programs: we run creative and educational workshops for children and youth and cultural manifestations, in co-operation with the Creative-affirmative organization Parnas, we are part of the movie caravan within the Uhvati sa mnom ovaj dan (Seize the day with me) Festival. I remember that once, after seeing the movies, children from the audience explained the inclusion to me: *‘There is a girl in our classroom who does not let us help her!’*

**I AM MOST PROUD OF** my brother’s sons and their achievements. The older nephew participated in the Drama workshop *Cvrčak (Crick-et)* children’s drama workshop, in the play entitled *Lepota različitosti (The Beauty of Diversity)*, on the subject of inclusive education.

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS IS persistence.** It is easier for me to keep going than to give up. During one of my rehabilitation sessions, a therapist told me: *‘You cannot jump, you cannot kneel, you cannot ...’ ‘I can crawl and kiss and jump!’* I said standing between parallel bars as I practiced walking. *‘You know how it is when you’re on a rock concert? Put your hands in the air and jump!’*

I don’t live by the rules because they are not just. You cannot do this or that, you have to do this ... It’s not true! Until you try, you do not know. I persistently reject other people’s rules.

**UNLIKE MEN, FOR WOMEN** it's more difficult to use the toilet. With artificial hips, I can't get up on the toilet seat, or 'aim from the plane', I have to sit down on the toilet seat – it has to be a toilet seat. I can't pee in the nature... If I were a man, everything would be so much easier.

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION WAS WITH Tatjana Srđić**, a colleague with whom I founded the *Kap (A Drop)* Association. With Anđelka Samardžić and all the volunteers from the Resource Centre; with Tatjana Stojšić Petković, who introduced me into the movement; with Nemanja Obradović from the Centre for Creative Gathering; with Aleksandar Malinović and Marko Torbić from the Youth Office of the Municipality of Temerin.

**IN THE NEXT YEAR I AM DETERMINED TO live day by day**, not to go too far with the plans. No matter what the day brings. I believe that it's smarter to live like that than to make plans and have them go awry. It may sound superstitious, but that's how it is with me. I'm waiting for this treatment to be over, I'm not thinking about anything else. I don't even think about it much, mostly I'd like to, just like a bear, crawl into a cave and sleep through that period.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED BY my wicker baskets and other creative work, by the things I make.** I cannot, nor do I like, to talk about myself, I reluctantly stand out. All I do, other people see it better and in a different light than I do.

ALEKSANDRA PANOVIĆ:

## *I Don't Have to Be a Pilot in Order to Be Able to Fly*

BACHELOR OF ECONOMICS

SECRETARY OF THE SOUTH BAČKA DISTRICT DYSTROPHY  
ASSOCIATION AND PRESIDENT OF THE VOJVODINA  
DYSTROPHY ASSOCIATION

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME...** I am best known for my **smile, cheerfulness and optimism.**

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE a pilot. I wanted to fly.** I wanted to enroll in the Pilots' School/ Aviation Academy in Vršac, but my parents didn't approve of it. So, I started Grammar School – which I didn't like – and which later I changed for Secondary School of Commerce because all my friends were there. I was under my parents' influence first and then I followed my friends. There were more blunders of such kind... I studied law only to realize that it was not my cup of tea. Then I started and I graduated economics. Technically, I still deal with economics, because the job of a secretary demands budgeting and project finances. Meanwhile, I realized that **you can still fly as a passenger and you don't have to pilot a plane.**

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED BY** the desire for exploration and something new. **I'm inspired by curiosity.** Every day there is a chance to discover something new both in ourselves and in our surroundings.

Every day brings a new experience. What have I discovered today? It is that we can still manage everything even when we're not in a hurry. We can finish our obligations faster if we're calm and composed.

**TO ME ACTIVISM IS assisting others to deal with difficulties that you have gone through.** And to do so with all available resources while relying mostly on your own experience.

**I GOT ENGAGED IN ASSOCIATIONS** while I used to be employed by the Yugoslav Army, and I needed a special driving license for people with disabilities. In trying to get one, it turned out that, for a year, the Association was without a secretary, so, due to my degree, I was offered the position. **That was the first time that I met people with disabilities, even though I was born with a disability.** I have been diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy or SMA type 3 at the age of six. **And according to doctors' predictions I should have been in a wheelchair by puberty. One thing is learning about it from books and another, completely different, living with it** and having positive thoughts. As a child I was a member of an association, but I never needed any kind of help with education (I excelled at school), nor did I ever go to organized summer holidays (because my mother is from Makarska on the Adriatic coast, where I spent my summer holidays). Only after I had finished faculty and worked for five years in the army, as well as in a company as a bookkeeper, did I get engaged in the Association. I began as a coordinator of a project that we initiated with Save the Children International in 1999. We were researching the current situation in education, with a special emphasis on discriminated groups: children with disabilities and Roma children.

**I AM MOST PROUD OF** my accomplishments as a mother and as a parent. That is my biggest pride and my greatest achievement in life.

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS IS optimism.** Nothing is black to me, I always see something positive in everything and **I always see the light at the end of a tunnel.** This

is a skill I accomplished – by working on myself, maturing, and **becoming more spiritual**. My parents' influence probably contributed to my turning out to be like this, they gave me a solid foundation to build on.

**UNLIKE MEN, WOMEN IN OUR ASSOCIATION have initiative. We are the stronger sex that tows the men, and in return they are just used to getting everything served on a silver platter.** There are more men in the Association, because they suffer from genetic neuro-muscular diseases more often than women. The Association is not gender-oriented, essentially everything depends on the activism of the members, their mobility and sensibility: whether they want to participate in projects, or whether they just want to be passive assistance receivers. Considering the fact that men are generally in managerial positions, to me as a woman, it was much easier to get help from funders and donors on behalf of the Association. Sex appeal works!

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH mostly local organizations.** Coordination Committee of organizations of people with disabilities in the City of Novi Sad consists of nine representative organizations, amongst which is the Dystrophy Association. In 2005, we organized a protest and managed to get increased personal care and assistance, benefits for car import and registration. What we had accomplished in 2005 concerning increased financial help was just rewritten in 2011 and introduced into the Law on Social Protection regulating increased funding for personal care and assistance. **Josip Vlček and Miroslav Homa** from the Association of Paraplegics and Quadriplegics were the initiators of that action and the rest of the associations joined in. That was successful team cooperation.

**IN THE NEXT YEAR I AM DETERMINED TO...** Frankly, I'm getting a little tired, my enthusiasm and energy have decreased as compared to my beginnings, when I believed that something can be changed in this country. However, all of it is merely **flogging a dead**

**horse.** Just as I see a change, elections come and the political parties change, **and here we go again, from scratch.** After so many years in the disability movement, I'm slowly losing my strength and will to tell the same things over and over again, to different people with no clue, who are just placed in different positions by the ruling party. **And just when they learn something, they get replaced.** Perhaps the younger generations will be able to continue this... Still, I can't say that nothing has changed over the years. In 2006 we received a Rulebook on Medical-Technical Assistance and in 2008 a Rulebook on Prolonged Rehabilitation. Even so, the problem is that these rulebooks are constantly being rewritten by people who neither have any idea about our way of life, **nor do they have any contact or experience** with disability.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED BY my work and the efforts I put into organizing** summer camps for children with disabilities. We teach our youngest members how to fight and how to lead dignified lives no matter what. I start and finish each day thinking of those children. Since 2000, when I first participated in a summer camp of the French organization Handicap International as a student, I have had this idea that we need to encourage and empower parents not to blame themselves, but to guide their children on the right path. Up until now, I have organized fourteen such **camps and each year I say 'That's it!' because it gets ever more difficult to raise funds, and then I continue doing it.** I hope I will persist in this – to make this path easier for others...



**MARIJA VERBALOV:**

## ***I Love Life***

A FENG SHUI INTERIOR DESIGNER

MEMBER OF THE CITY ASSEMBLY OF NOVI SAD, IN THE  
COUNCIL FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES OF THE DEMOCRATIC  
PARTY [NOT AFFILIATED TO ANY OF THE POLITICAL  
PARTIES, THIRD TERM]

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME...** I am a mother of a seventeen-year-old daughter named Dunja. I love life. I believe that everyone does her or his best at a given moment.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE** aTV reporter. I remember a game in which I pretended to be a speaker that reads the most important news about environment, ecology and nature – which I was always interested in. As time passed, I was thinking more and more about medicine and genetics, but that changed, too. New opportunities opened up and my interests spread in different directions. After the traffic accident, I began to pay more attention to the environment and to the question of how I perceived different places. At first, I began to think about how to organize and arrange my living space so that it is maximally functional, while at the same time satisfying my aesthetic criteria. I enrolled in the New York Institute of Art and Design and seriously devoted myself to design.

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED BY** good people and their smiles.

**TO ME ACTIVISM IS** promoting my experience and knowledge in a particular field through various forms of contact with other people, which in a simple way enable others to improve the quality of their lives. Experience in itself is not enough, but it is necessary that certain knowledge has its function. One beautiful saying goes something like this: knowledge without experience doesn't mean much. Activism is actually a kind of socially active work that contributes to raising awareness, improving living conditions and improving the quality of life in general.

**WHEN DID MY ENGAGEMENT IN THE CITY ASSEMBLY START?** In 2007, I went to the Cultural Center of Novi Sad, to one of the films that was featured at the *Uhvati sa mnom ovaj dan* (*Seize the day with me*) Festival. When I had arrived, it turned out that I couldn't enter in my wheelchair. Some good guys offered to help: *'There is a step inside, but we will carry you! We'll put some boards and ... The two of us will carry you in.'* I thought: *'There is no way anyone will carry me, because that is not the way ...!'* I was interested in this film, but if I couldn't get in, I'm not welcome there. I don't feel well about being lifted and carried – one, two, five steps or as many as there are, along with the wheelchair. Of course, I thanked them for their kindness and readiness to do everything that was in their power, and – I left. Later, in an amicable coffee conversation with friends, who were then in the Democratic Party's office, I told about this event. One of my friends asked me if I would like to engage in the Democratic Party's Disability Council. Back then, this was the only party in Serbia that dealt with the issue of disability and that presented the significance of this topic in their policy program. I asked to read more about this: *'What do you think and want to do in the field of disability?'* If this fits into my picture, I will accept the proposal, provided that I don't have to be a member of the party, nor promote ideas with which I do not agree in any way. When I read the Democratic Party program, I was completely thrilled with the awareness that disability is not just a matter of people with disabilities, but a matter of human rights. It was clear to me how important it is for

anyone who can change something – to really do it. If all started from there. We had a press conference where I spoke about the facilities that are inaccessible to the disabled. There was so much to do in the city, and I was actually inspired by that fact. During my first term of office (2008-2012), I was the Deputy of the City Assembly President, and in the next two terms a local MP on the Democratic Party's list, as a person with no political party affiliation. It is very difficult to change consciousness through political engagement, because politicians do what they are said to do, whereas activists and associations do what is most important for citizens' quality of life. It's always debatable how many professional staff politicians have in specific fields. Here goes that famous saying: *Nothing about us without us!* Of course, it is best that people with disabilities themselves indicate what is important for them to improve their living conditions. It's far more practical than having someone who absolutely doesn't understand it, nor has that experience. This person has to imagine what they would find useful if they had some sort of disability.

**I AM MOST PROUD OF** the fact that I remember the image of the city of Novi Sad in 2007 and, when I go back to it, I see a huge difference. Everything that was done in the period from 2008 to 2012, and even later, somehow started to be established – we began to think in a different way. Huge things have been done: The Law on Social Protection was passed, and then the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities, the 2012-2018 Novi Sad City Accessibility Strategy was made. That set the frame that could be further upgraded and improved. I am pleased that I have had a share in all of this.

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS** IS consistency and foundation in working for the benefit of all of us. Persistence in the awareness that what I achieve for others is sure to be good for me. And vice versa.

**UNLIKE MEN, WOMEN** are far less politically active, both at the

city, as well as at the provincial and national level, although the law is clear and binds the decision-makers that there should be at least one third of women on all lists. When electoral lists are made, parties are obliged to observe the law. In the Democratic Party that is the case – not only this year, but four and also eight years ago – at all levels. Personally, it is very important to me that this is not just a declarative effort, but it is really so in practice. In Serbia, it's all about body language, you're evaluated by how you look and how well you're dressed, and then they tell you: *'It's easy for you, you just dress up, and everything works!'* That's sexism. The truth is the rights of women and men are not the same, although the Constitution and the laws stipulate that we are equal. It's hard for me to make an analysis of whether I've been better or worse off because I'm a woman or a wheelchair user. This multiple minority phenomenon – to be a woman with a disability who is politically engaged – mainly causes astonishment, sometimes admiration or high appreciation. People often get distant because of the feeling of their own inadequacy to talk to someone who has a visible disability. But if you make the first step and then allow the meeting to take place spontaneously, if you don't get offended because someone is unsure whether they need to help you in any way, if you are open – people will relax. I have had no experience with discrimination – including positive discrimination – since I've become a wheelchair user, but the realistic situation in Serbia is that it is far from gender equality.

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH** the Živeti uspravno (Living Upright) Center and ...IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA Organization. These are the associations with fantastically developed awareness and mechanisms for dealing with important topics in the society. These are definitely associations that have been working on projects of social importance, projects that have wider application from some short-term local information of the population or education that later isn't used by anyone.

**IN THE NEXT YEAR I AM DETERMINED TO** dedicate myself

more to my designer's job, which is, at this moment, more creative than my political engagement. And with regard to my work in the Assembly and activism within the Democratic Party, I will maintain this perseverance and belief that doing what I do is not just for me, my building or local community, but for the general well-being. My idea is to bring back somehow the values that are forgotten or lost in translation, to help restore faith with those who have lost it. Some things may have slowed down, so I'll help to get them get back up and accelerate them. Wherever I can, I want to be engaged usefully and stay active. I find it hard to define a specific goal in my political engagement plan, because I'm a non-party person and I don't have this type of power within the party, but through the work of the Council for People with Disabilities in the DP and in the City Assembly, I believe that I will be able to raise awareness of accessibility needs in all aspects of life, for all people alike.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED BY** mutual respect, whether in assembly seats, in street meetings or in some events. I would like to have an impression that we felt good with each other. That feeling that we are considerate towards each other, that we support and respect each other, is actually something that people have forgotten about.

MILESA MILINKOVIĆ:

## *Bad Conditions Instigate Change*

GENDER STUDIES MA, PEDAGOGUE (BA)

PRESIDENT OF THE PARNAS CREATIVE-AFFIRMATIVE  
ORGANIZATION, DIRECTOR OF THE “*UHVATI SA MNOM OVAJ  
DAN / UHVATI FILM*” (*SEIZE THE DAY WITH ME/ SEIZE THE FILM*)  
FILM FESTIVAL

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME...** I identify with everything I do, mostly with the “*Uhvati sa mnom ovaj dan / Uhvati film*” (*Seize the day with me / Seize the film*) Film Festival. It wasn’t meant for me to be a PhD in gender studies. I like to think of myself as an activist in every sense.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE** a doctor. I think that all people with disabilities have, more or less, this stage of wanting to be doctors, probably because of the medical model of disability.

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED BY** books and bad conditions, because they instigate change. The first book that pushed me into research and learning was *Jane Eyre* – a versatile woman who knew so much. I have the impression that until the beginning of my studies at university I didn’t even know how to learn, everything came down to mere acquisition of data that is easily forgotten. *Jane Eyre* inspired me to seek proper paths towards knowledge and education. Poor social and family conditions encouraged me to do something about it. The apartment in which I used to live in Užice was surrounded by high hills,

which made me feel captured. At the same time, the need for space was growing in me, so I found it in Vojvodina some years later. I saw Vojvodina for the first time at the turn of my eighteenth birthday and it immediately became a synonym for spaciousness, strengthening my desire to leave Užice.

**TO ME ACTIVISM IS** to live a life so that with every step you take you can do all in your power in order to contribute to, improve or change something. Not just for yourself, but having others, who may not have the resources to do so, before your mind's eye. As Gandhi said: 'Be the change you want to see in the world'.

**I FIRST GOT ENGAGED IN AN ASSOCIATION** when I finished high school and went there to ask if they could help me find a job. At the Dystrophy Association in Užice, they told me they couldn't, but they referred me to some of their activities. I sat there and listened. In 2000, I participated in a seminar entitled *Možeš i ti (You can do it, too)*. It was about empowering women with disabilities led by the ... *IZ KRUGA – Srbija* Organization, where, among other things, I completed a workshop leaders' training. After that seminar, I was no longer the same. I left my shy and silent self behind, the withdrawn one avoiding negotiation with others in fear that they would not understand me. I activated myself and soon began to run workshops for young people I met on trips, because that was what traditional associations used to do – they organized trips. I formed a young team, with an idea to start visiting members of associations who existed only on paper, without the associations having a real insight into the conditions in which their members lived. This was my first activist action, which propelled the young from the association of Užice. After that, I wrote another project, implemented in my absence, because I enrolled the University of Novi Sad and moved there. I met Milica Mima Ružičić Novković at one of the seminars in Novi Sad. I remember how she showed me around the students' city: 'This is the canteen, over there are the faculties... Once you come here to study, you will be the president of the Association of Students with Disabil-

ities!’ As if she had predestined me for this role, and I myself was full of desire to engage and change something. I got involved in all the activities that I could join in, even before the classes at the university started. I don’t see many motivated students today, nor as inquisitive as I was. Is it perhaps because everything comes far too easy to them? After a seven-year break between high school and university, I saw the beginning of studies as winning the lottery! Soon I became the secretary of the Association of Students with Disabilities and later became its president.

**I AM MOST PROUD OF**, what else, but the ‘*Uhvati film*’ (*Seize the Film*) Film Festival! During my term in the Association of Students, a sound recording studio for literature started operating. The idea emerged in one of the project writing trainings and a colleague and I shaped it into a project. Once we came to certain realizations through movie festivals, we started the project *Umetnost ruši zidove* (*Art Destroys Walls*) (2010). This was the first project where people with disabilities had the opportunity to learn how to make a movie. During a three-months’ training, they mastered the basics of film language and production. As a result, up to now, there have been seventeen films on the topic of disability, gender, sexuality. I am proud that through film workshops people became empowered in some other segments. I am proud of my own documentary *Trenutak radosti* (*A Moment of Joy*) about mothers with disabilities, which I hope will be broadcast on TV soon. On a personal level, I am proud to have been doing belly dance for a time, which I love very much. In order to participate in it, I had to overcome my own fear and prejudice. Realizing how much dance can be beneficial in terms of self-confidence, I designed the *Ja sam za ples* (*I’d Like to Dance*) project, to make it available to other women.

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS** IS that I’m more responsible for others than myself – which may not be a good feature after all! At the bottom of it all there is my conviction of mission, as if I were Moses, a kind of a savior. I remember drawing a path or a passage on a plate while I was eating in the stu-



dents' canteen. I have always been helping people, representing them in various matters. That is probably a crucial thing in me, because I can't say I am ambitious. It was never my goal to finish university to gain a title, to become somebody and something. I enrolled my postgraduate studies to deal with women with disabilities at academic level, because somebody needs to do it! It's more logical to take that up myself than to wait for someone else to do it. I expect no personal gain, I got involved with this mission and I am living the experience.

**UNLIKE MEN, WOMEN IN ASSOCIATIONS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES** work very hard, not on leadership positions and without laurels for their merit. This is my impression of traditional associations. The power behind the disability movement is actually the power of women. Nowadays, powerful, non-traditional organizations are being founded and run mostly by women. If I had to list men with disabilities who are the bearers of real change, apart from Damjan Tatić I don't know any other. The fact is that women are promoting changes – visible or not. On the other hand, it happens that women, who have real, even monopolistic power, don't have sensitivity to issues of women with disabilities or alternative ways of work. There should be radical cuts and it needs to be said: we no longer deal with humanitarian work, trips, socializing just between ourselves. It's hard to deal with members who are accustomed to a certain type of advocacy (if it could be called advocacy at all). If you ask me, I would abolish traditional associations. Is it more important to create conditions where I can go alone, or spend the resources on someone else doing it for me? Traditional associations are doing us great adverse favours, while people who might be the bearers of change do not get into managerial positions.

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH** the Association *Spirit* from Rijeka, Croatia, who, together with Parnas, are implementing the '*Uhvati film*' (*Seize the Film*) Festival. Through the Film Caravan, that we organize in various cities, we are networking with other organizations. We have achieved good coop-

eration with the Creative Workshop from Kraljevo, Serbia, that has designed a performance on the accessibility issue. The plan was to jointly implement a caravan of films about women with disabilities. I've established cooperation with women from the *Partner* Organization that leads the film festival of people with disabilities in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina. We started working online and when we met for the first time this year, it seemed as if we had been drinking coffee together just yesterday and that we'd known each other for a long time. That kind of cooperation is very dear to me – when we work on the same goal, which then brings us closer on some personal levels.

Organizations that were crucial to my personal development and activist growth are definitely ... *IZ KRUGA*- Srbija and the Association of Students with Disabilities.

**IN THE NEXT YEAR I AM DETERMINED TO...** It's hard to say, because I have no goals at all, nor am I ambitious. It's all about a moment of inspiration: whenever I'm confronted with any kind of a problem, something clicks in my head all of a sudden and I have a solution. That's what my work is based on, rather than on detailed planning. For a long time now, I've wanted to make *Oliva* come to life. *Oliva* is a site that I started with the idea to bring together women with disabilities – the very women who have no influence in traditional associations – with whom I would create a group support platform, a safe place where women could share their personal stories. The idea is that this initiative of women with disabilities also exists as a real-life association that works on empowerment, because a large number of women don't know how to write projects at all or how to use Word Press. *Oliva* is at a standstill, because I think I need support for such an undertaking, I do not have influential acquaintances, nor am I in the circle of people who are politically active. The laziness factor also has a part in it, even when it comes to the projects we love.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED BY** a successful film fes-

tival, which gained a reputation of the Cinema City. At least until I start identifying with *Oliva*. I am someone who collects and explores different tools that can change both the world and people's minds.

GORDANA MIKOVIĆ MUČIBABIĆ:

## *Giving Up is Never My Option*

GRAPHIC DESIGNER

MEMBER OF THE DEAF PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATION OF NOVI  
SAD, MEMBER OF THE STRELAC SHOOTING CLUB AND MEMBER  
OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE SERBIAN SPORTS  
ASSOCIATION OF THE DEAF

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME...** I have a husband and two children and I live for my family. I'm a shooter. I work as a graphic designer (programmer-associate), on graphic programs and mobile applications.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE a Native American.** I often wore Native American costumes and I loved tents – I don't know how long this lasted. Later, while I was still living in Germany, I wanted to be a teacher, because I could make very nice drawings and could write. When I came to Serbia, it was difficult for me to follow the lessons because I didn't know the language or Cyrillic alphabet well. When I learned Serbian, I thought I would be translating from German into Serbian and vice versa. For a time, I didn't think about what I was going to do in the future, I just wanted to finish elementary school. Before enrolling in high school, I had an idea of becoming an architect, but there was no place in that course, so I got a suggestion to study for the Layout Editor. After high school, I graduated from Graphic Engineering at the Technical College, which defined my profession. After finishing school, in the following years I worked in private printing

houses, until I gave birth. A few years later, I got a job in the IT sector. **I persistently and consistently learn, so that I can follow the innovative technological processes that change from day to day.**

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED** by **sports**, as a way to express my abilities. Being a deaf person is not something that devalues me, on the contrary – it motivates me to be even better. I wanted to compete with the hearing, because I am aware that deaf people can deal with all activities, without any restrictions. On several occasions, I practiced tennis (four years, with interruptions). When I started to dance, the instructor didn't want to accept me because I was deaf and he gave me a month's trial period. When the first month passed, he was stunned: *'How do you do it, when you can't hear?'* he asked. He wanted me to continue, but I had already decided to leave. Before, I didn't think about competitions at all, but some magical set of circumstances sent me to the first sports competition. Fourteen years ago, a friend asked me to come to the firing range. *'What does it even mean?'* I asked her. *'I don't like shooting!'* I didn't want to touch the gun at all. **'We are missing a woman in the team in order to compete. It's an amateur competition, not a big deal,'** she told me. Still I accepted to try and – I liked it! When we went to the competition, I was the best. Later on, I continued to go to the shooting range and practice by myself. My club mate, Željko Antolović, who trained and competed with me, finished the coaching school in order to work with me – which helped me a lot. He is someone in whom I find a reliable support and with whom I have learnt to observe sports rules. Not only did he help me, but also the whole of our national team and, as the president of the Sports Association of the Deaf of Serbia, he contributed to all the deaf athletes of our country.

**TO ME SPORTS ACTIVISM IS a real feat – a constant endeavour to persist and to reach a step higher each time, without thinking about surrender.** Giving up is never an option – you should always push forward.

**HOW I GOT ENGAGED IN ASSOCIATIONS' WORK?** At the age of fourteen, when I started doing pantomime for deaf people's festivals. There I met other deaf people and mastered the sign language I didn't know before. I like having friends in the hearing world, and in the world of the deaf. In the association, I did folklore dancing for several years and pantomime for fourteen year; every year we traveled to a competition. In recent years, I haven't been active in deaf people's associations because I'm completely occupied by my children, trainings and work and I don't have time for additional activities.

**I AM MOST PROUD OF** my children, they come first. Then of my medals, of course.

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS** IS calmness. I have a lot of patience and I always do my best. I'm not a quarrelsome person, I'm mostly calm – so much so that sometimes I seem shy.

**UNLIKE MEN, WOMEN** aren't sharp enough. There are many more men in the Deaf Persons' Organization and they aren't open to proposals coming from women; **they aren't open to women's voices at all**. Some women have an initiative, but not enough, others are afraid of failure; some have potential, but are not proactive. It would be good if women were sharper, instead of agreeing to a subordinate position. **I am the only woman in the Sports Association of the Deaf**, because there are few women who are actively engaged in sports. As someone focused on a sports career, I had the support of the association – everyone wanted to make progress and show **how far a woman could get in the sport**. Personally, I never felt that something was more difficult for me because I was a woman. At the moment, I can't dedicate myself to this engagement, but I certainly want the status of deaf athletes to be equal to the status of hearing athletes and for the deaf to be more active in sports and management.

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH women from my sports team, Bojana Prodanović and Jasmina Rimski.** In addition to our selector, **Željko Antolović**, I had excellent cooperation with **Aranka Binder**, who was a coach of the national team until 2013 – we are all grateful for everything that she did for us during that period. The Sports Association of the Deaf of Serbia stands by our side, supports and encourages us.

**IN THE NEXT YEAR I AM DETERMINED TO go to Deaf Olympics and I want to win a medal or two.** I expect the same from other athletes. In the world of those who can hear, they don't know about us and our successes, which should change. There are Olympics and Paralympics, and deaf athletes are out of both of these categories. (We can't compete in the Paralympics, because we don't have physical disabilities.)

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED AS a dangerously sharp shooter,** as they call me in the deaf community. These are people who are proud of me and my successes and jokingly they ask me: *'Why do you always have to come back with a medal?'* It isn't my ambition to be famous, it is important for me to maintain my privacy, but also to show my skills.

MILICA MIMA RUŽIČIĆ NOVKOVIĆ:

## *I Confide in Life*

MA IN LINGUISTICS

PRESIDENT OF THE ŽIVETI USPRAVNO  
(LIVING UPRIGHT) CENTER

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME...** I'm an activist. (At thirteen I initiated foundation of an anti-smoking association). I love to explore, I love to learn from the things I see and I love to share what I've learned. I believe in life – which is a primary thing, everything else stems from it.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE** an explorer. When I was eight, my mother gave me a notebook and a pencil and said '*Write!*'. I always had a way with words. The question was whether I would choose literature or language. I wanted to study English, but when I went to Karlovci Grammar School and realized that everyone spoke English better than I did, I decided that I should be dealing with the language I know best. I knew that I would study Serbian. I read everything that came into my hands. Although I have forgotten half of it, it is very useful in my relationship with people, because I can recognize a phenomenon. When I come up against an architectural barrier, a curb that is twenty centimeters high, I read the message clearly: '*You don't belong here!*' Obviously, no one thought about the fact that you also need to come this way. All these situations helped me to find out what I should do. I've always pictured myself as someone who explores, reads, learns and teaches. In order for me to do this, I need to have the



basic precondition, which is – assistance. That’s why I began to work on personal assistant issues. It is more important than our daily bread.

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED BY** things that make sense. When I see that something can be created out of something else, I can dedicate my whole life to it. I love to translate, because it means discovering something new. I found myself in the history of the language, where I search for the origin of words – which is digging, an archaeological work. I’m attracted to activities that require finding and creating something new – from discourse analysis to crosswords.

**TO ME ACTIVISM IS** whenever we notice that something needs to be done – we really do it, using all available information and knowledge at a given moment. Whoever decides to engage in activism should, first of all, focus on getting informed. I learnt that experiential support is more effective than professional. Professional support has become a kind of a meat market, which should be re-examined. In the concept of help, the person who helps always has more power than the person receiving help. All problems related to the exercise of civil rights belong to the same matrix: some have greater power than others. Personally, I see each person as equal to myself and have the same expectations of them. I believe people come in contact with each other for a reason. I have experienced that people with disabilities are mostly perceived by other people as pets to be satisfied: they feed us, dress us, bathe us...I would not change my body for anything in the world! But whenever I want to perform physically, they see me merely as an intellectual, as someone whose mind works, and they treat me as a genius. Where I perform with my head – as a scientist and researcher – people focus on my physiological needs: *‘Do you need the toilet / food / accessibility,’* which constantly indicates that I am different. And I know I’m the same! We are all different, but we have the right to equal opportunities.

**HOW I GOT ENGAGED IN ASSOCIATIONS’ WORK?** In order for my colleagues Milica Bracić and Goran Milovac to be together, I

agreed to the invitation of the Cerebral Palsy Association to go to the Silver Lake. Goran was invited by the Paraplegics' Association to go to this trip, and in order for Milica to go, she offered to be my assistant. The two of them had just begun a relationship and this was an opportunity for them to spend more time together. I was really down at the time! I was in my final year of studies, in love with a man who would most likely never show up again in my life, it was too hot, and somehow, I was tired of life. We went to the Silver Lake, where two important things happened to me: the initial entry into the movement through the knowledge of what the social approach to disability was, and meeting my current husband. At the Silver Lake, we underwent psycho-social support trainings led by representatives of the future team of the Living Upright counseling, with the support of Handicap International. The counseling center was soon opened and its first president was Tatjana Stojšić Petković. At that time, I still lived in a student dormitory and I remember that the representatives of the counseling center visited me in my student's room. An international seminar on the rights of young people with disabilities was to be organized, so they asked me if there was a youth organization that would help. I said '*Let's establish it!*' This is how the Association of Students with Disabilities was founded, where I was the President for two years. When the Democracy Commission of the US Embassy called for a bidding of a small grant, I remembered that the Center had the first research on social distance towards people with disabilities (in 2003), and suggested that we make a campaign throughout Vojvodina. The idea was to present the results of the research and to bring other organizations closer to the standard rules of the United Nations on equalizing opportunities of persons with disabilities. We visited several cities, the Handbook on Disability in all the official languages in Vojvodina was published, and the film *Kako te vidim (How I see you)* was made. Meanwhile, the board of directors convened and I got nominated the President. Since then, I have been at the helm of the Center, which I'm no longer happy about. Ten years ago, I had clear life plans: to finish my master's degree, become a mother, and for personal assistance service to begin working. I was hoping that younger

people would take over my work at the Center. Still, apart from my master's degree, I didn't manage to do the rest.

**I AM MOST PROUD OF** the fact that my faith in life has never been altered, despite all that I have experienced, both the beautiful and less beautiful. A movie can be made about each of my day – so much happened! All that has happened to me is just a moment in time that testifies about the times in which we live; it will all be a part of history one day.

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS** IS persistence and faith in what I do. Everything that I do – from making cakes to translation – I believe I can make it. What drives me crazy is dealing with stupidity. I have a great degree of tolerance in relation to procedures and I understand why people do something or not, but I am allergic to stupidity. Stupidity in terms of lack of conscience and responsibility. We are bound to do something to stop the things from happening the wrong way.

**GENDER ISSUES AT THE CENTER** have never been problematic, because there have been mostly women there. Today, the Center has fourteen members, nine of whom are women. The core team consists of women and two activists from the gay movement. For some reason, gay people have been involved since the very beginning of the Center – probably because in both cases it is about discrimination on physical basis. People with disabilities, LGBT people, women and Roma people suffer discrimination at first sight, that is, the first impression labels us. One of the leading activists in the movement told me: *'Do not do this, people will connect us with LGBT people!'* It was horrible to me. Of course, we continued. Lately, we are facing a relapse of nationalism, which is terrible, because we are returning to the patriarchy. In the beginning we indicate our values to anyone who wants to join the Center, which they will accept, or go somewhere else (after all, life will teach you – one way or another). I'm much more radical in that part of the story, because in my life I no longer have time to go back to 'the first grade'. As long as the construction

of a nationalist state is in focus, people are just numbers. As long as we don't look at a particular person from the aspect of their social role and their possible effect on society, regardless of national, religious or other affiliation, we can't talk about civil rights.

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH** my colleague Miško Šekularcac, who is the vice-president of the Center. Every communication with him is a creative venture in every sense. Also, with Jelena Sokref, who was my personal assistant, and then she successfully finished peer education and got involved in youth work. The result of all this was establishment of the first experienced counseling center in Serbia, through which three hundred people passed. When I work on a translation with my best friend Elvir Vaštag Kasavic – I don't have that kind of cooperation with anyone. I created something with Marko Mirković and Svjetlana Timotić in the Association of Students. Until recently, I worked perfectly with Miodrag Počuč, who left the Center. People who have greatly influenced my life are my Serbian language teachers, without whom I wouldn't be who I am now. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to cooperate with Professor Vera Vasić, from whom I learned a lot, both in terms of training and responsibility.

**IN THE NEXT YEAR, I AM DETERMINED TO** publish the life story of Gordana Rajkov, who has been with the Movement for 50 years now. I also want to reprint the book entitled *Bez sažaljenja (No pity)* – about the history of the movement of people with disabilities in America written by Joseph Shapiro. I owe these two books to literature. As for me personally, I would like to finish the doctoral thesis on the role of women in the development of the movement of people with disabilities. I don't think this will happen at the University of Novi Sad – it will be Berkeley or some other university. I wanted to deal with the analysis of life stories of women from Vojvodina, to find out what is common for them, so it could be a basis for a provincial gender equality action plan. It was always my goal to prove how much more similarities there are than differences.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED BY** my silly attitude towards life. Whatever happens in our lives, we always have the opportunity to create something else. We have just one life to live and we need to follow that kind of goofy conscience.

JELENA RADOVIĆ:

## *Why Should I Feel Bad About Other People's Misconceptions?*

PRESIDENT OF THE *SUNCE (THE SUN)* ASSOCIATION OF CITIZENS  
DEALING WITH CEREBRAL PALSY AND POLIO ISSUES IN THE  
SOUTH-BAČKA DISTRICT SEATED IN NOVI SAD

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME** are my smile, perseverance and optimism.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE** a swimmer. Swimming used to be my greatest childhood love, and it still is today.

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED BY** the ordinary, everyday things, those that generally go unnoticed by anyone but me, be it simply nice weather, the sun, or something else. And, of course, my friends and family. The hardest thing was, perhaps, to learn that nobody will make my day better if I do not do it myself.

**TO ME ACTIVISM IS** to start a new day with a smile. That's the slogan of my motivational events and books. For ten years now, I've been holding motivational forums that help me as well. This way, I give an example to others, especially children.

**I GOT ENGAGED IN ASSOCIATIONS** as a little girl, I remember that my father brought me there when I was only in the first grade of elementary school. Even though everyone in the Association was old-

er than me, they welcomed me warmly. The first engagement I recall was a computer training run by people with disabilities. I remember being taught by someone with the same form of disability that I have. In 2010, I began conducting a legal workshop that has been running ever since. I was really nervous for the first time: ‘*Will I be able to do this?*’ I was supposed to give legal advice to parents and members of the Association on how to exercise their right to personal care and services, the right to tax exemption, how to obtain assistive technologies... For example, if someone has the right to get a wheelchair, I present them with a way to do that – and thus make it easier for others to follow their example as well. I mostly communicate via e-mail, although I am more and more here in the offices of the Association. The journalistic part of the legal workshop is also very important – we regularly provide attachments for *Preokret (Turning point)*, the magazine of the Serbian National Union of Associations Dealing with Cerebral Palsy and Polio Issues, and for *Suncokret (Sunflower)*, the magazine of the Vojvodina Union Dealing with Cerebral Palsy and Polio Issues. Based on my own personal experience, motivational events emerged from the legal workshop. There is nothing better than to hear that your words mean something to someone.

**I AM MOST PROUD** of my two published books and my university degree. Because of my difficulty with speech, a great deal of people didn’t get to know me better, they rather get some of their impressions of me through my family and friends. Books are my personal testimony. They speak about me the best, because through written words everyone can understand me. It is through my books that I achieve the most direct contact with people, I transfer my personal experiences. My second book, *Neobični putnik sa osmehom (An Unusual Traveller with a Smile)*, is based on the motifs of a film with the same title, screened at the 2012 *Uhvati samnom ovaj dan, (Seize the day with me)* film festival where it won the audience award. Why should I feel bad about other people’s misconceptions? Hey, I could finally understand myself!

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS** IS persistence. Persistence is closely related to motivation. Without persistence, motivation and will, there is no activity.

**MEN AND WOMEN IN OUR ASSOCIATION** can do everything equally, although in principle women have stronger personalities, they are often more educated and persistent than male members. Our current project, *Equality in the Kitchen*, which we are implementing through cooking workshops, now has more male than female participants. On one hand, these activities support independent life, and at the same time they represent a story of equality. Most of our workshops are led by women, because women by their nature have a greater deal of understanding and patience. When it comes to people with disabilities, the society is generally inclined not to make gender differences – we are all placed together. The most important thing, however, is how active we are. I am becoming aware that everything passes, that I live only now, and never again. [...] There is no point in wasting my time regretting about what I can't do.

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH** Dragan Vojvodić, one of the best motivational trainers in Serbia. After his lecture, I was no longer the same. I will always remember it because I had just started motivating myself. Dragan asked me the question that left me speechless: '*Do you hope to be walking again?*' Even to this day, I don't know the answer to that question, but it's in my head every day. I achieved a good cooperation with Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization, working on the project of the *Assistive Technology* as a way of improving labour rights of people with disabilities. During this project, I was the only one in a wheelchair, so they used much of my experience.

My cooperation with Milan Petrović School is extremely important to me. Up until the fourth grade, I went to a regular school and I was the first student to use a wheelchair at the time when there were no ramps, no elevators, nothing of the sort. After the fourth grade, I had



no choice at all – it was to be or not to be. In fact, that year no person with disabilities could exercise her or his right to education, but my parents were persistent. If I hadn't started Milan Petrović School, I would have stayed at home. Today, I give motivational speeches at the school – it's a special feeling to have such an opportunity at your own school, to be a role model to other kids.

**IN THE NEXT YEAR I AM DETERMINED TO** make a motivational documentary film about some of the more recently recognized rights, such as personal assistance, rehabilitation. This film would show how important it is for us to exercise and to live our daily lives. I'm also planning to write another book, which will motivate others never to give up on their dreams... Every morning I ask myself: what do I want today?

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED BY** my smile. Whoever I met, received a smile from me. I don't want to be a sad owl without wings, we all fly through this life, the question is what remains behind us.

Quotes from the book *Neobični putnik sa osmehom (An Unusual Traveller with a Smile)* by Jelena Radović

TANJA ĐURIĆ:

## *Activism is Imminence*

PHILOSOPHY TEACHER (BA)

COMMUNITY MANAGER AT HOMEPAGE – AGENCY FOR  
CREATIVE APPLICATION OF DIGITAL  
TECHNOLOGY IN MARKETING

ACTIVE IN THE ASSOCIATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES  
OF NOVI SAD, THE CHAMBER THEATRE OF MUSIC *OGLEDALO*  
AND IN ...IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA, ORGANIZATION  
PROVIDING SUPPORT TO DISABLED WOMEN

**THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT ME...:** It's important to me to be creative and to be able to love, and humor takes precedence.

**AS A GIRL I WANTED TO BE** an actress or a singer. I loved impersonation! And later... Well, I didn't exactly become Dragana Mirković! (Those who have seen the play *U traganju za izgubljenom krletkom* /*In search of the lost birdcage*/ will understand me). In any case, I have experienced musical and acting performances in forms that I have not even dreamed of, or thought they would be possible. I didn't really think that I'd come out on a stage in a bra and talk about incredibly important things, in a play that, sarcastically speaking, should be entertaining. I love singing and I'm really sad that I didn't attend a music school, although I had opportunities to perform. My first performance was at the Jazz Festival – without music, which was

a unique experience. I still sing, I perform at karaoke parties and win prizes; I still don't know what I am going to do, but we are planning to create a band! I'm a little bit 'in my own class', yet versatile: I act, write, sing, draw...

**I AM ALWAYS INSPIRED BY** the things I used to do, write, create. I like to go a few years back, and remember things I used to do before. Sometimes it happens spontaneously and sometimes I do it consciously, to see what kind of feelings something I used to do in a previous period evoke in me. I find these confrontations with myself very interesting, and anything can happen during such encounters. People inspire me, because they are so different.

**ACTIVISM** means the life to somebody. Taking into account how and where we live, and considering that it is still not enough just to breathe and eat, activism is imminent. I may have been more engaged through performances and actions before, but now I am doing it through my own lifestyle. Not only do I point to a different picture, I **am** the other picture. Both through the performance, and through everyday life, in its most valued sense, we are fighting for the basic existential rights of people with disabilities. For example, Siniša Tucić is a poet – and that's enough; his commitment is strong and credible, he has already done a lot for our community. When people started to be aware of the position of students with disabilities in Novi Sad, and when so much was coming to light from the Association of Students with Disabilities, I had an impression that the wow effect was caused by the very fact that someone with disabilities can paint or write, regardless of the quality of her or his work, which was extremely hypocritical! People were being portrayed as a miracle, and that was the attitude that would remind me of my birth story, when I used to be perceived as an exhibit, a rare diagnosis, a wonder to be seen. Just because you are doing something or because you even exist as a person with disabilities – you're a subject of a general outrage! It took years and years to really start thinking about the quality of life of people with disabilities, and then about the quality of their creativity.

Siniša Tucić is primarily an authentic poet, and only then a person with disabilities. Once we reach this level of perception, the goal of activism will be achieved.

**HOW I GOT INVOLVED IN ASSOCIATIONS' WORK:** Being a member is certainly not equal to being fully engaged in their work. While living in Ruma, I didn't know any people with disabilities, nor did I know anything about this sort of activism. I understood some differences, but only later would I get to learn the terminology and types of relations that come with disability. My parents, mostly for financial reasons, requested some benefits from the state, so that I could continue my education. So I came across Milica Mima Ružičić Novković. I have to admit that it was difficult for me to, all of a sudden, belong to an association – it was really imposed upon me to feel as if I identified with people with disabilities much more than I did. For this reason, I wasn't active or interested in aligning with the work of the Association of Students with Disabilities during the first two years. In time, my mind seems to have expanded. I started listening to and observing other people's experiences, finding out about other people's stories and how they got where they were... Finally, I started identifying with the group and that's where my activism began. I started writing articles for the magazine of the Association of Students with Disabilities called *Trenutak (A Moment)* and that was how my engagement began. The magazine was edited by the members of the Association, with the idea to publish texts that would make us get out of the box in which we were usually presented to the society. We wrote about student topics equally interesting to us and other young people and in which we participated: culture and art, exams and going out... One of the crucial moments was a lecture, Empowerment through Art, by Ivana Indjin, to which I was invited by Svjetlana Timotić. She estimated well that it was my topic – the lecture really encouraged me to get involved. As much as some of the common beliefs are not valid, they are very firm, rigid and restrictive. I remember that, in the period before I started my university studies, I was struggling with a very strict belief that I should opt for a profession that

allows me to work exclusively with my mind and speech – without any physical effort. That's why for a while I thought that I would become a speaker, which I partly accomplished by volunteering in the studio of the Association, where I read literature to the blind and visually impaired. That was an interesting experience and, at the same time, one of my very first engagements in the Association. Working in associations of this type provides for a rich professional experience: from project writing, coordination skills and workshop management, to team management. When I became active in the Association, I was sorry I didn't realize the importance of this much sooner, because it offers so many possibilities.

**I AM MOST PROUD** that I turned out to be like this! I am proud of my parents, because they have enabled me to do so much that we are all proud of now. I'm proud to have been on the stage. I am proud of the fact that I have developed this kind of thinking, because not everyone has the privilege of shaping their own consciousness in such a way to be able to see a phenomenon from all sides. I'm proud of the people around me.

**MY MOST SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION I ACHIEVED WITH** Ivana Indjin. When I met her, it was a turning point, because I began to understand what activism is really about. Ivana's work definitely had a great impact on me; vice versa, too, I would assume. My first reaction was: '*Great, I'll be on the stage!*' At the time, I still didn't talk about my disability, not even with close friends. Changes began only after a few sessions with Ivana. Otherwise, we are all most vulnerable in our teens and, in my opinion, this was particularly so in my case. Ever since then, I have tried to conceal everything that is different on my body, so I always wore long, wide and bell-shaped sleeves – even in summer. In summer I wore loose shirts and I never uncovered my body in public. And as such, I got involved in the play *Zovem se neizgovoreno* (*My name is unspoken*), an anthropological theatre that started from psychological workshops and personal stories, where everything is out in the open. My first attitude towards it was: '*Oh,*

*no... Do we have to talk about our own disability and will I get to play myself?’ I accepted this as my first breakthrough on the stage. Over time, I got a different picture about everything that happened and I understood how necessary it was for me, and how important for the others. After this play, I can only say that I’ve been performing in sleeveless shirts and in shorts.*

**UNLIKE MEN, WOMEN IN THE ASSOCIATIONS ARE** more productive. In the Association of Students with Disabilities of Novi Sad, there were surely more female presidents than male ones. In the activist scene in general, girls are definitely more productive. Up until now I have never cooperated with men with disabilities in any artistic processes. Outside that environment, it’s a bit difficult for me to be realistic, because I can be quite harsh when I notice only a bit of insolence and lack of interest pointed towards me as a disabled woman. This I sanction easily – I must have learned it from an early age, watching my mother solve it.

**OF ALL MY QUALITIES, THE ONE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS** IS that I can observe every situation from multiple angles. Analysis – if it doesn’t kill you, it only makes you stronger!

**IN THE NEXT YEAR, I AM DETERMINED TO** live normally. I intend to dedicate myself to myself and my fiancé. I want to travel and implement all my current ideas. I would like to start a band, to act in at least one performance and to make an artistic cooperation with my future husband work, to have a joint exhibition or performance with him next year.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED BY...** I wonder whether I should be remembered or not?

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...

**Failing to recognize those who have given themselves before us  
is cutting ourselves off from strength, diminishing continuity of the change  
bringing us back to the starting points over and again.**

**In order to know where we are heading,  
we must inevitably reflect on  
where we had come from in the first place  
and bear in mind that nothing that is happening to us is not for the first time –  
it has all happened to someone before us.**

**By respecting our predecessors,  
we activate their qualities within ourselves,  
while by honoring their contribution we empower our own.**

**This is why it is important to decode, record and remember  
the history of activism of women with disabilities.**

...



**IZ KRUGA**

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