

# IT'S ALL COMING UP Sunflowers

BY CELESTINE FRASER

## How the Sunflower Lanyard is making life more accessible for people with invisible disabilities

**T**he word “access” draws many different images for people. Some people see ramps, wheelchairs, and Changing Places facilities, others see guide dogs, walking sticks or priority parking. The reality is that only 8% of disabled people use a wheelchair, and 80% of disabled people are living with a hidden disability.

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower is a lanyard scheme which aims to make non-visible disabilities visible. It was created in 2016 by the accessibility team at Gatwick Airport, after they realised that many of their 500,000 annual disabled travellers weren't getting the support they needed: because travellers with non-visible impairments

didn't “look” disabled, they weren't being approached and offered assistance. This made flying painful and stressful, and put off many disabled travellers from air travel altogether.

Airports are notoriously inaccessible environments; from the sensory overload for autistic people, to the vast walking distances between gates which are challenging —if even possible— for people with mobility impairments. Surely, thought Gatwick, there had to be a way for people with non-visible disabilities to communicate that they did, in fact, have access needs?

After discussion, workshops and extensive collaboration with national and international disability charities, the group settled on the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower: a green lanyard with a yellow sunflower design. The design felt joyful and free of the biases and negative assumptions that are so often associated with disability. It was at once discreet and distinctive – a symbol that staff would immediately recognise and that “could be seen at a distance”, but which wearers “could choose to use when they needed to without having to shout”. “The beauty of the sunflower is that it empowers individuals to disclose as much or as little as they want,” says Annette Cmela, the lanyard's brand director.

After being introduced at Gatwick Airport, the lanyards spread first to other UK airports, and then to supermarkets, schools, colleges and universities, to businesses, financial services, trams, buses and trains. Today, over three million of the lanyards have been distributed worldwide, and the scheme has official presences in the US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands and Ireland, with an upcoming launch in the UAE. “It's been a pretty fast growth”, admits Cmela. “It's grown from a very simple idea at Gatwick Airport to becoming a universal symbol.”

While the 1968 International Symbol of Access (the ubiquitous white-on-blue “Wheelchair Symbol”) is often seen as synonymous with wheelchair access, the sunflower lanyards have rapidly become an internationally recognised symbol for invisible disability – representing everything from chronic illness to OCD, from Tourette's to epilepsy, from neurodiversity to PTSD. “The sunflower is really a trigger for people who know about it to approach that person and ask, ‘how can I help?’”, says Cmela.

“It's really helped me to communicate what I need”, says Dana, a dyspraxic TikTok creator. Dyspraxia, she explains, is a “coordination disorder” which affects “social regulation, emotional



regulation, balance and memory". Dana explains that she has "done over 80 hours of driving lessons and couldn't pass," so she relies on public transport: "But because I look like I don't have a disability, bus drivers don't wait for me to sit down. Or if it's really busy and I need to sit in a disabled seat, people can be slightly aggressive. They think 'you're twenty-four and you're young, you can't have a disability'". Dana now wears her lanyard at work, on public transport and in public spaces because it "gives [her] power."

Lauren, an autistic student and educator, wears her lanyard almost every time she leaves the house. She explains: "It gives me a bit more confidence and a sense of security just to know that I do have something there to show that I am disabled."

As an autistic person, she finds shops and supermarkets "overwhelming".

"If I'm stood at the till it can take me longer to process things so then when I'm trying to get my phone out to pay, I've got to make conversation with the cashier, there's various different noises going on, there's a lot of people... so it's nice to know that if someone sees my lanyard they just think 'oh, this person might need a little bit of extra time'."

Access, Cmela explains, can look any number of ways: it should be individualised to the person, their disability and the context. For someone with a stoma bag, it might mean being given a key to a disabled toilet. For someone who is neurodivergent, it might mean being able to slip into a quiet room. For someone with chronic fatigue, it might mean being allowed to skip a long queue.

During the pandemic, the meaning of access inevitably shifted because everything moved online. The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower quickly responded with digital sunflower badges and backgrounds which could be used during virtual meetings. "Zoom fatigue" was unanimous, but at least this way, Cmela explains, people with non-visible disabilities "could show that they were having a bad day."

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower is a useful tool which enables people with non-visible disabilities to access the support they need. But it's also a reminder for the rest of us that there is more to a person than meets the eye – that we are all infinitely more complex, more needful and more interdependent than we look. It reminds us that access need not be expensive or high-tech: "I genuinely think that access is just listening to people," says Dana. "It doesn't take much to be like, 'oh, is there anything I can help you with?'"

Disability is as diverse as people's access needs. A non-visible disability can mean anything from autism to arthritis – and access can mean anything from a toilet to extra time. But wherever we are and whoever we're talking to, the bright green sunflower lanyard is a prompt, reminding us that people's needs may be wildly different – but we can always choose to be kind.

