Good Housekeeping February 2023

Women Who Lead

‘I’m shifting attitudes towards disability’ Kate Nash has experienced arthritis since she was a teenager. Now, as founder and CEO of PurpleSpace, she is helping make the world of work accessible for everyone.

Very often, society focuses on the challenges disabled people face, rather than also highlighting the life-affirming elements of our stories. As founder and CEO of PurpleSpace, an organisation that supports and champions disabled employees and works with companies to become more accessible, I’ve made it my mission to call out negativity and change perceptions. I want us all to feel able to display our vulnerabilities, as well as our talents, without judgement or repercussions. I was 15 when I was diagnosed with juvenile chronic arthritis, or Still’s disease. Before that, I’d experienced months of mobility issues and pain. I wanted to do the things everyone else did. Yet suddenly life was altogether different. I couldn’t dress myself. I couldn’t cut up food. I looked different and couldn’t walk far. I noticed people lower their expectations about what was possible for me. My mum said, ‘It would be nice if you could get a little job.’ I just heard ‘little’. She was signalling to me that the world was designed awkwardly so it could be a struggle for me to secure a job. The pity people showed me was tough to deal with, but it set me on a path that would dictate my life. I studied Sociology and Social Administration at Roehampton University, where I became interested in the politics of disability. Then, I got a job in a hospital, supporting people with learning difficulties move from institutional to community-based care. It opened my eyes to ways they could be belittled. I went on to work in an adult training centre for those with learning difficulties, before a bad arthritis flare-up showed me I needed a less active job. I spotted a job advert for a campaigns director at what is now Scope, a charity that was pushing for anti-discrimination legislation. I wasn’t qualified, but was given a volunteer role, which led to a job as an assistant to a director. One of my proudest achievements was supporting parliamentarians to write the bill that eventually became the Disability Discrimination Act (now the Equality Act), which made it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in connection with employment and access to goods and services. I was a director for Young Arthritis Care, then chief executive of Radar (Disability Rights UK). In 2010, I went freelance. I was fascinated by employee resource groups (ERGs) – networks that support a particular group of people in a company, such as disabled people, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ employees – and worked with companies to set up networks for them. In 2015, I created PurpleSpace, a global online membership subscription companies can join to help them set up resource groups internally as well as providing training. We have more than 2,000 clients across 200 organisations, including Barclays, Google and the Home Office. Disabled people are still 50% less likely to be in work than non-disabled people. For most companies, at least 12% of people will have a disability, whether visible or invisible, yet one in five do not feel comfortable sharing they have a disability with colleagues. By empowering organisations from within, I’m hopeful the tide is turning. I’m extremely proud to have set up an organisation that plays a strong role in hastening the pace of change. Positively Purple (Kogan Page) by Kate Nash is out now; purplespace.org

Making a change Risk taker or careful planner? Both. I’m most productive when… I work with purpose.

My biggest inspiration is… Fellow travellers.

I’m changing the conversation by… Making it easier to be who we are.

For me, inclusivity means… Being able to assimilate all parts of our identity.

Creating community is important because… It excites and motivates us to keep going.

To make change happen, we all need to… Examine our souls in the dark – to know exactly who we are.

My proudest achievement is… Creating PurpleSpace and a community of game-changers.

I relax with… Music, food, family and friends