Jes Graham, diagnosed with muscular dystrophy at four, talks about navigating life, stairs and activism at 20.

By Annie Bekker

ON BEING

"CONCIOUS OF THE CHAOS"

IN CAPE TOWN'S ABLEIST STREETS

"I want my baby in, it's part of me," she says, pulling her walker closer to her as I take her picture. Jes, 20, "alien / mermaid / fairy / sheep / intersectional feminist / access activist w muscular dystrophy" as her Facebook provides, is cool in a buzz cut and bright crop top despite the 30 degree heat.

Studying illustration full-time, Jes is also the founder of the "No Access" Cape Town project. "I don't want to waste time; I don't let myself chill," she says, a statement that only sinks in when she explains how she close she came to dying last year.

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In 2015 Jes had neck surgery, she opens her Facebook, scrolling to a picture of her smiling at her matric art exhibition, both arms up behind her neck. "I couldn't support my head before the surgery," she explains. She shows me a picture of her at school, standing on the grass next to a friend, "I got by before then," Jes says, referring to the surgery in which they stretched out the muscles in her neck. The operation let her support her head but changed the way that she walked. It was in the months following the procedure that Jes got a walker, stopped being in denial of her disability and started getting involved in activism.

"Places suck, pavements suck."

She pulls out two red "No Access" stickers from her walker, offering me the best one. Started early this year, the project is about breaking down ableist barriers in the city. In May she printed 110 of them, sticking them up around the city at the entrances of offending businesses – sites without handrails, with inaccessible bathrooms, without ramps.

"A lot of them have been taken down," she says, naming and shaming the Saltriver Creamery, Devils Peak Brewery and Cornerstone College. But things are changing, already a sticker on a post box at the School of Practical Philosophy in Claremont has encouraged the institution to look into installing ramps.

"I don't really go out because of this," Jes says when I ask about disability friendly places in Cape Town. She opens up her Facebook messenger though, scrolling down past several conversations with event pages until getting to one from Trenchtown. She had seen that they were renovating and messaged them to ask about accessibility updates. "They're building a new wheelchair friendly bathroom in December," she says. Bathrooms are a problem. If the bathroom isn't accessible, the event isn't. "Sometimes they have these super hard swing doors and someone has to stand on the other side so that I can get out. It takes the point away from being independent". People don't understand what accessibility means sometimes." Just this week Jes asked a local club about accessibility and got the reply: "The venue is very centrally located in Cape Town… Lots of parking." 2016 has seen a wave in fighting for social justice – from affordable education to racist hair policies and an awareness of privilege; why are we still not thinking about disibility?

Jes nods. "You're literally on your own fighting this battle. People don't even see it. It's a mindset which you have to unlearn." She references the phrase: "wheelchair bound", exclaiming, "But wheelchairs give you freedom! There is a lot of internalised self-hatred."

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Jes speaks about avoiding ableist language, a small way in which the able-bodied can make the world a more inclusive space. Ableist language includes using words such as: "crazy", "insane", "lame", "retarded", "spaz", "stupid", "mad", and "losing your mind". "I've changed 'that's insane' to 'that's intense'," says Jes. "Language is important. When someone starts using a word or stops using a word it changes."

She starts telling me about inspiration porn, which I sheepishly have to ask her to clarify. "It's how able-bodied people objectify the disabled. When a disabled person does something inspiring and then it becomes 'that's my only purpose in life, to inspire you'. I learnt about it in Grade 10 and was like: 'holy, no wonder this shit pisses me off'."

And there is a lot to be "pissed off" about. Jes tells me about a design college in Cape Town which she looked at going to. They said that they had a lift but hadn't bothered to fix it; when Jes criticised their lack of accessibility online they then deleted her Facebook post. "It's like fuck you too," she says. "I'm exhausted already and then you have to take this shit on. Places suck, pavements suck."

The entire time we talk she's explicitly aware and makes me explicitly aware of the complexities of social justice activism and her place in raising change. "I don't want to do activism stuff where people turn me into a token idol – I don't want to make it

about a white female. It's not just that simple, there is lots of interplaying stuff going on."

Jes explains her "No Access" stickers as a non-confrontational way to enact change. "I'm not very confrontational, I don't have the energy and it can be really daunting; people get really angry when criticised," says Jes. "They can finally have a nuisance, my life has been a whole fucking nuisance because of them," she says, referring to society's ableist institutions. She continues, explaining her passion for activism, "It gives me a drive, a purpose in life – it makes it all worthwhile having shit to deal with."

"The beauty of things being accessible is that it actually benefits everyone"

Referencing her activism as well as her interest in illustration, Jes says: "Access design and retaliation social justice are the two interests that give me a reason to live. I want to directly, actively improve people's lives."

"Take glasses, bad eyesight has been seen as something that needs to be fixed but fashion normalised it – it can be done. There needs to be an overlap between design and medicine." Jes explains an accessibility project in which simplified drawings could be used to help those with special needs while also lending a hand to those who have had too much to drink, "The beauty of things being accessible is that it actually benefits everyone," says Jes. As I leave, I'm hyperaware of every step I descend.