

# Disabled make a point in social media

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Stella Young at the hotel where the disabled toilet (inset) became a storeroom. *Photo: Angela Wylie*

ONE afternoon last month Stella Young went to the Glenferrie Hotel in Hawthorn to have a beer with some friends.

But she found the disabled bathroom stacked with cases of wine and it was impossible to get her wheelchair inside.

Earlier Ms Young had been told by staff that the toilet was out of order. Hotel manager Mark Henderson now admits that was a lie.

The cases of wine from another hotel were put in the disabled bathroom by Mr Henderson's business partner, and had been there for 10 days.

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"Look, it was a huge amount of stock and there was nowhere else to go," Mr Henderson said. "I came in to find it here. I just took too long in getting it out."

The episode is not uncommon.

Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes, who is blind, has had similar experiences. "It's unlawful to discriminate against people on the grounds of their disability," Mr Innes said. "If you have an accessible toilet and effectively block its use, then that is just the same as not providing one."

Patricia Wilson runs excursions for the disability support service, Inclusion Melbourne. She said she stopped going to one council-run facility after it became too burdensome to clean away drug-injectors' blood in the disabled toilet.

On another occasion at a public pool Ms Wilson had to wait with the person she was caring for, freezing outside, while two people had sex.

Ms Young said she was frustrated with the Disability Discrimination Act, which requires a formal complaint, and now prefers social media.

Rather than use the hotel's female toilets with the door open, which she said "isn't very dignified", she left, but not before tweeting an image of the crammed room, which has now been viewed almost 3000 times.

Ms Young, a comedian who edits the website *Ramp Up*, wrote two emails to hotel management, but it was only after she wrote on their Facebook page that she got a response.

"People with disabilities too often feel as though we don't belong in public spaces," she wrote. "We'd really love your help in changing that." Four hours later the hotel wrote back, apologising for their "blatant ignorance [and] rash, senseless and absent-minded decision-making". The space has since been cleared.

Kelly Vincent is a member of the South Australian Legislative Council and uses a wheelchair for her cerebral palsy. She has seen disabled toilets used for storage at an Adelaide restaurant, and elsewhere to store furniture.

"Having an accessible toilet that is unusable is maybe worse than not having one at all because it sends the message to people with disabilities that it is just a symbolic cross to bear for these business owners," Ms Vincent said.