

Stella Young, writer, comedian and disability activist, dies aged 32; tributes flow for 'passionate advocate'

8 Dec 2014, 9:52pm



Photo: [Stella Young edited the ABC's disability news and opinion website, Ramp Up. \(ABC News\)](#)

Prominent disability activist, writer and comedian Stella Young has died at the age of 32.

A statement from her family said she passed away unexpectedly in Melbourne on Saturday evening.

Young was born in Stawell, country Victoria, with osteogenesis imperfecta, a genetic disorder that causes bones to break easily.

At the age of 14 she began a life of advocacy in which she campaigned for the disabled community.

"With great sadness we acknowledge the passing of Stella Young, our much-loved and irreplaceable daughter and sister," the family said.

"Stella passed away on Saturday evening, unexpectedly, but in no pain.

"A private funeral will take place soon, followed by a public event in Melbourne, with more details to come."

Leaders pay tribute to Stella Young

Tributes have poured in for Young, who was the former editor of the ABC's disability news and opinion website, Ramp Up.

ABC managing director Mark Scott described her as "an unforgettable communicator and a passionate advocate".

"As a writer and broadcaster Stella was sharp and incisive, challenging and provocative," he said in a statement.

"She was very warm and generous, the first to laugh and to make us all laugh.

"Stella helped us understand disability issues by sharing with a raw honesty about her own life and forcing us to reconsider how we think about disability and create an environment where those with disability can best get on with their own lives.

"She took great delight in challenging conventional wisdom and lazy thinking."

Federal Opposition Leader Bill Shorten paid tribute to Young, saying she was "a fierce advocate for people with disabilities".

"She has battled discrimination because of her disability. But she was a much larger than life figure and she's going to be sorely missed," he said.

Federal Victorian senator and Assistant Minister for Social Services Mitch Fifield said Young had a "generosity of spirit and taught many polities ... a great deal".

"Extremely sad to hear of the passing of Stella Young. She was a ceaseless advocate for a better deal for people with disability," Mr Fifield tweeted.

Paralympian Kurt Fearnley said the world would be "less interesting" without her.

"She fearlessly challenged every stereotype of disability," Mr Fearnley tweeted.

Comedian Josh Thomas tweeted: "Stella Young is so terrific. A hilarious, rare and super cool lady. Heart breaking news."

Former prime minister Julia Gillard, who introduced the National Disability Insurance Scheme, also tweeted a tribute to Young's advocacy.

"Stella Young was a shining light for care and action on disabilities," it read.

"We mourn her passing and rededicate ourselves to her spirit."

Stella Young: A life of advocacy

Young was an ambassador for Our Watch and has been a member of various boards and committees in the disability sector.

She proudly described herself as a "crip", despite objections by others.

"People get all up in arms when I describe myself as a crip because what they hear is the word 'cripple' and they hear a word you're not allowed to say anymore," she told [720 ABC Perth in 2012](#).

"Crip is a word that I find empowering the same way that some members of the gay community, but not all members of the gay community, find the word 'queer' empowering."

Young was a member of the Victorian Disability Advisory Council, the Ministerial Advisory Council for the Department of Victorian Communities, the Youth Disability Advocacy Service and Women with Disabilities Victoria.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews said she had made the state a more "caring and compassionate" place.

"Stella dreamt of a society where people with a disability who studied, worked and achieved great things were conventional, even ordinary," Mr Andrews said in a statement.

"As she leaves this world, that dream is ever closer.

"While Victoria is poorer for her passing, I know she has inspired a generation of Victorians, of every background and ability, to live a life without limits."

She was also a passionate advocate for women experiencing family violence.

"We ask community members to consider making donations in support of Domestic Violence Victoria, one of the causes Stella felt intensely passionate about," the family statement said.

I want to live in a world where we don't have such low expectations of disabled people that we are congratulated for getting out of bed and remembering our own names in the morning.

Young was a two-time state finalist in Melbourne International Comedy Festival's Raw Comedy competition and hosted eight seasons of Australia's first disability culture program, No Limits, on Channel 31.

She had been a regular contributor to [ABC's The Drum](#) since 2011, writing about issues for disabled people in the wider community and the disability services sector, as well as covering the 2012 Paralympics from London.

She also wrote for Mamamia and The Punch.

Australian Paralympic Committee Chief Executive Jason Hellwig said the disability community had lost one of its most prominent and passionate spokespeople.

"Stella was never afraid to tell it like it is, to challenge people's perceptions and to fight for what she believed in," Mr Hellwig said.

"The insight Stella was able to provide was a great asset to the ABC's coverage because of her ability to look critically at the wider impact of the Paralympic Games.

"It is not just about the athletes, the sports and winning medals, it is about so much more than that.

"Stella knew that better than most and that was reflected in the depth and quality of the stories she told."

'Disability doesn't make you exceptional'

Young campaigned hard against the idea that having a disability made her exceptional or brave.

"I want to live in a world where a 15-year-old girl sitting in her bedroom watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer isn't referred to as achieving anything because she's doing it sitting down," she said in April this year.

"I want to live in a world where we don't have such low expectations of disabled people that we are congratulated for getting out of bed and remembering our own names in the morning.

"I want to live in a world where we value genuine achievement for disabled people, and I want to live in a world where a kid in Year 11 in a Melbourne high school is not one bit surprised that his new teacher is a wheelchair user.

"Disability doesn't make you exceptional, but questioning what you think you know about it does."

Young studied to become a teacher before beginning a career in journalism.

Young 'socked it to the world'

George McEncroe, a comedian and close friend of Young's, said her cheek was always matched with compassion.

She said Young would listen to people talk about euthanasia and the cost to the state of carrying disabled children full term during panel discussions and not storm off.

"She could sit there with such poise, essentially being told she shouldn't exist and yet not turn on them, not berate them, not storm off. [She would] just listen to them with great compassion and intelligence and respond with some incredible zinger," McEncroe said.

"[She was] just was so unapologetic for her presence for her voice, for her truth and she socked it to the world in a really powerful way."

McEncroe said Young's disdain for descriptions of herself as an inspiration was now a bitter-sweet irony for those she left behind.

"I think she hated being called an inspiration but, bad luck, she was. She was the funniest, kindest, most honest person I think I've ever met."

Comedian Ben Pobjie said Young was an inspiration because she lead an extraordinary life.

The pair's first encounter was when Young criticised a tweet of his.

"I, not knowing who she was, got rather angry about that. And fortunately she was not the type to hold a grudge," Pobjie said.

"She often railed against being used as what she would call 'inspiration porn'.

"And she objected to the idea that disabled people should be seen as inspiring just for living a normal life.

"She was right, it shouldn't be inspirational for people with disabilities just to live normal lives. But ... I think, she lived an extraordinary life, that she was an extraordinary women."

He said Young's humour could be confronting but she always won people over.

"People would often, they'd start off feeling like this was going to be uncomfortable, but as it turned out, she was so fearless and so good humoured about it all, that people were won over," he said.

First posted 8 Dec 2014, 9:41am