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Bridging the Gap stories: César González, President of the National Association of Public Officials with Disabilities of Paraguay (ASONADIS)



My name is Julio César González and I am a **State Official**. I was diagnosed with **infantile cerebral palsy** and **polio** in 1982 when I was 2 years old, and, from that moment, I started going to rehabilitation at the National Secretariat for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (SENADIS) (<http://www.senadis.gov.py/>). There, I received an orthopaedic apparatus to be able to walk, and finally, I decided to use the crutches as support since they are the ones that better fit my physical dynamics.

In **school** and college, it wasn't easy. In the early 1980s, there was a lot of discrimination and **children with disabilities** could not go to school. I was accepted into a public school thanks to political influence, which was the only accepted way: a politician called the school and ordered that I was included; otherwise, I could not have studied. That's how I went to school and then to university and was able to graduate in 2000.

I worked in different jobs, such as a cashier or insurance salesman by phone, until I was able to get a job in a **public institution** of the State thanks to a 2008 law that allows persons with disabilities to enter public institutions to get a job and a decent life. Once I found a stable job, I began to study again. At the age of 30, I got married and then we had a boy and a

girl, and today I have a nice family. This law was a turning point in **Paraguay** and, like me, many other persons with disabilities began to **work** for the State.

One day, some of us had the idea of founding an association and a national union of civil servants and workers with disabilities that we called **ASONADIS** (National Association of Civil Servants with Disabilities), and today we are more than 1200 members nationwide, including workers from the public and private sector. Our main mission is to interact with the Government as representatives of persons with disabilities and advocate for their rights so that they can have a decent job and, through it, achieve inclusion. We do **advocacy** work in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate to promote legislative projects. For example, we have proposed a legislative change to make public transport free of charge and another to anticipate the retirement of persons with disabilities, as their health condition is often deteriorated much before they turn 60.

Our philosophy is that we do not want the world to adapt to us, but we have to create a place for ourselves in the world, to **overcome the barriers** by ourselves. We believe that through effort and study we can build our future, be professionals and serve people, and raise families. We do not want to be an object of pity and, in this sense, I think it is very important to change the communication of the stories of persons with disabilities, often seen as passive subjects and mere recipients of aid. We don't want only rights; we want also duties. We want to pay taxes, to contribute to society like everyone else. That's why we work to empower people with disabilities to take their place in the world and not have to wait for help.

I think it is very important that persons with disabilities join forces by creating trade and **civil society** associations in order to get all the breakthroughs we need. When we join forces, we become strong and can make our voices heard. Together we can unite and support those who need to improve their condition, both in cities and in rural areas. For me, an example of unity is the farmers' associations, whose demonstrations are powerful and have the strength to bring 15,000 farmers to the protests every year, making their voices heard. On the other hand, it is really difficult to find 500 persons with disabilities united in a single event. So, we think it is important that persons with disabilities know that there are



associations that defend their **rights** and can empower them.

So, if I had to give a message, it would be that of the **unit**. Persons with disabilities represent 15% of the country, between 85,000 and one million people. However, we do not achieve many significant changes because we each want to do our own thing. We must take off our ego and unite to reach people who do not even know we exist. In this way, we will have more strength to advocate and make the **inclusive policies** of the State reach all corners of the country. We ought to be able to unite and make our voice heard louder and louder.

César González, President of the National Association of Public Officials with Disabilities of Paraguay (ASONADIS)

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