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### How did the Be. Institute come about?

While working for the former Auckland City Council as the disability adviser, I was asked to manage the Rugby World Cup 2011 access programme for Auckland. A group of us identified this major sporting event as a key opportunity to create a new conversation about accessibility and to leave an access legacy for the country.

Before we knew it an amazing social change programme was being born.

### What are the key aims of the organisation?

It aims to inspire and enable a 100% accessible society for all people. It works by addressing the social, physical and personal, and works across sectors. It is a social change programme.

# Minnie Baragwanath

*Minnie, 40, is making a difference in the lives of disabled Kiwis through new initiative Be. Institute*

### How long have you been partially sighted?

I was born with Stargardt disease, a form of macular degeneration, but was not diagnosed until I was 15.

### How has it affected your life?

At 15 I went from being a student without a disability to one with a disability virtually overnight. While the

condition wasn't instant, the diagnosis was, and this deeply affected my life as a teenager. I was treated differently, and certain people suddenly thought I couldn't participate in sport or take part in activities I used to.

Being partially sighted has actually given me vision. It has affected the way I see the world, made me passionate about social change and led me to develop Be. Institute. I think the resilience and problem-solving skills that come from having a disability are part of the ingredients that help get me going and drive me each day.

### How do you think New Zealand ranks against the rest of the world when it comes to acceptance of – and opportunities for – those with disabilities?

I think we are similar to many Western countries, and better than most developing countries because in those areas there is no social welfare for disabled people who are often at the bottom of the pile and have to resort to begging and so on.

However, New Zealand employment rates for disabled people are terrible, and it is blind women who are among the lowest. Thankfully, organisations such as the Employers Disability Network are trying to turn this around. Take me – according to statistics I should not be in employment. My joke is that because of my sight I did not see the glass ceiling and just broke through it!

### What has been your proudest career moment?

Starting Be! Becoming the CEO of this amazing

organisation and doing amazing work with an extraordinary team. It is a dream come true. During my 20s I didn't know if I would ever be able to have a full-time job, let alone run an organisation. I remember a friend's father suggesting I might aspire to be a switchboard operator. □