



When the Icelander, Mr. Auðunn Gestsson, celebrated his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday on 25 February he not only became the oldest Icelander but quite likely the oldest person in the world living with Down´s syndrome.

For Auðunn Gestsson 21 March is a special day since it is both [World Down Syndrome Day](#) and

[World Poetry Day](#)

. Five years ago, he published a book of poetry to celebrate his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.

“Footsteps in the sand/ A little bird flying /In the blue sky/ Who else but the golden plover!” , Mr. Gestsson, wrote in one of his poems which typically feature the birds, nature, friendship and some characters from the popular children´s book of Swedish author Astrid Lindgren.

“I have been happy,” Gestsson told RÚV, the Icelandic national television on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

He lost his mother when he was only 7 but was brought up by Gerður, his older sister. She says that the reason for her brother's longevity is no doubt the fact that he used to work everyday for decades selling newspapers in the streets of Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland.

Today virtually no children are born with Down syndrome in Iceland. Several European countries have introduced prenatal screening tests, which has led to a decrease in babies born with Down syndrome, and a few countries are even close to eradicating all Down syndrome births.

In Iceland, which introduced prenatal screening tests in early 2000, almost 100% of women who receive a positive test for Down syndrome terminate their pregnancy. For Denmark this number was 98% in 2015. ( <http://cbsn.ws/2wh4zO5> )

Down syndrome is a chromosomal disorder. A person with Down syndrome has an extra copy of chromosome 21, meaning that the person will have 47 chromosomes instead of 46. The reason why this happens is still unknown. It commonly results in variable effects on learning styles, physical characteristics or health. ( <http://bit.ly/1fhAcex> ) The prevalence of Down syndrome is between 1 in 1.000 to 1 in 1.100 live birth worldwide. ( <http://bit.ly/2phmWO4> )

At World Down Syndrome Day last year in Geneva, Charlotte Fien, a 21-year-old woman with Down syndrome, spoke to the United Nations about the eradication of people with Down syndrome. Miss. Fien expressed anger and frustration and said, "I have Down syndrome, I am not suffering, I am not ill. None of my friends who have Down's syndrome are suffering either. We all live happy lives. We go out to the pub, have dinner parties at my friend Aimee's house, have boyfriends, and have plans and goals for the future."

This year's theme is #WhatIBringToMyCommunity. With this theme, The United Nations seeks to highlight and acknowledge how people with Down syndrome can, and do, contribute throughout their lives, in everyday life situations.

"I don't feel I should justify my existence," said Frank Stephens, who has Down syndrome and is an advocate for people with Down syndrome, at US congress in October 2017. He added, "I

have lectured at universities, acted in an award-winning film...we make the world a happier place. Is there really no place for us in the world?" ( <http://bit.ly/2DGIQPW> )

In recent years we have seen more people with Down syndrome on the international stage. In 2015 the Finnish rock band Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät qualified for the Eurovision Song Contest. In 2017 at New York Fashion Week, the Australian model and designer Madeline Stuart, who has Down syndrome, launched her own fashion label. ( <http://reut.rs/2FNpVsn> )

And Mr. Gestsson is living proof that people with Down's syndrome are also poets. UNESCO states on the occasion of World Poetry Day that "poetry reaffirms our common humanity by revealing to us that individuals, everywhere in the world, share the same questions and feelings". This applies also to people with Down's syndrome.