

What makes life good

Submission to the Productivity Commission by Cameron West

Like I said in the introduction, I'm one of the Disability Educators in the Scope Community Educators team. I've been doing this job on a casual basis for nearly 10 years. My boss jokes that I do this job on a VERY casual basis, but I know she couldn't run the gigs without me! And she knows I'm serious about doing a professional job.



Having a job has changed my life.

I have a friend in the Scope Community Educators team who said, he was stoked to do something where he was valued because he has a disability, not always in spite of that.

I feel like that too. It's awesome that people really want to hear what I have to say about disability, because they can see that I know what I am talking about!



Employment is one of the things, that keeps me going, when things get tough.

But it's not just any old job, I have a job that makes a difference to people: to people with disabilities, and to people who meet people with disabilities.

I help people understand each other, and get along better, and that's great. Lots of people tell me that everyone should hear our stories, and get our training.

I love the power in this job too. I run the show, and I get to wise crack my way through it. Seeing me up there at the front of the room, sends a really important message to everyone, about what people with disabilities can be capable of. I mean, it's not often you see people with disabilities in the driver's seat, is it? And I make the most of it. I give my co-facilitators hell!



Unfortunately, they often give it back. They reckon, that I like the sound of my own voice!



That maybe so, but I ought to like it, my voice bloody well cost me enough. Does it cost you \$17,000 to be able to open your mouth and crack a joke, or try out a new pickup line?

That's how much the talker I use is worth, and that's a lot of fundraising at the local pub, since the government only covers about \$7000.



And don't get me started on the topic of my wheelchair, and how much all the other equipment that I need costs, to buy AND get fixed. But you all know that equipment is important, and hopefully an insurance scheme would get that nightmare sorted out for everyone.





But I do want to tell you all, that the person I am today is thanks to one person first, Karen Britton (and then all the people like her who came after her).

She was the first person who really believed in me. She shocked me, into growing up and speaking up. I didn't know I had the right to. She saw things in me that I didn't know were there, and she kicked me up the bum, whenever I was too scared to try new things.

The first time I met K.B., I remember she came to a Balloon Football (BFL) meeting, and she took me aside. Then she said to me, that she wanted me and some other clients, to run the Balloon Football League, instead of the Leisure Action staff doing it. Of course, my answer to her was “No”. Then I got the famous “LOOK” that said, “Wrong Answer Westie”.



Like most people did, I ended up doing what Karen wanted me to do. and it was the best thing I could have done. Those meetings gave me my first taste of crowd control. I used my humour to get people on my side, and get them to do what they needed to do.

Then about 7 months later, in 1996, she said to me that she wanted me to go for a position as a Disability Educator. I said to her, "Excuse me K.B., I have not worked before". I got the look again. And then she said "Please try it". And here I am now.

Now I want to tell you
what I think the
government should
do for people with
disabilities, and that
doesn't mean just
throwing money at us
(but I won't say no if
they do!)



And I thought I could help by telling you three really good things in my life that I wish everyone with disabilities could have. Last week I would have said that the first one is my girlfriend, except that we just broke up, so I can't crow about her any more.

But even so, I had the chance to meet her because Scope set up their day service in a mainstream community house. So for the first time I had some real freedom in how I spent my day. There is more freedom to go around chatting to people there. If you can't get your messages across as quick as everyone else, you need more time to make friends and influence people!



I could hang out with other people who worked there, and who came to classes there. My girlfriend worked at the community house. We couldn't have just hung around together for ages, if I wasn't there all the time and just part of the community like everyone else. She wouldn't have had time to find out how awesome I am. Now I need the chance to convince someone else about that, so getting out in the real world matters even more to me now!



I like the fact that Scope is trying to get clients out into the community more now. Making everyday contact with all sorts of people is something I wish everyone with a disability could do.



But I also wish everyone could have inspiring Disability Services staff, like K.B. and Rhonda Joseph, and other awesome support people, like some of the people who work with me.





I have a staff member, Dave, who has worked with me for 12 years. Every December I am scared he is going to come up to me and say, “I’m leaving”.

I want to say to you, please
look after Disability
Services staff really well.
Because if governments
support disability staff well,
they will support us well too.
And then the good ones will
stick around.



You wouldn't believe the energy it takes to train and hang on to good staff. Staff managers think they do all the "Human Resources" work, but you've got no idea how much effort we clients put into keeping the good staff happy.

Because we all know that the good ones sure as hell don't stick around for the great pay they get. If we could get the government to pay your staff better, that'd make a huge difference to our lives.



The same goes for good transport, because good transport means: good transport staff, staff who stick around, get to know us as people, and learn how to assist us well. We need more vehicles for transport, and more people who really want to do it.



When you are dependent on other people, they have to know you, they have to be on your side. I have some awesome taxi drivers now (it's taken some doing, let me tell you!) They're even on my birthday invites list.





So there, there's my three things: everyday connections in the community...

well supported support staff,



top quality transport.

I've got them, and I wish everyone had them..

And I've got a great job, too. And when I had a beautiful better half as well, all we wanted was a house to live in together, and then we'd have been as happy as pigs in the proverbial. You try holding a relationship together when you have no privacy, and staff are watching everything you both do.

But housing is another big topic that I could go on about for hours. Everyone knows that people with disabilities need the same housing options as everyone else in the community.

So for my three points, I think I've covered six, so maybe they're right, maybe I do like the sound of my own voice.



But like the audiences tell me, I do know what I'm talking about. Thanks for reading this.

