

Shaun's Story

Shaun and his mother Suzette told his story in a recorded interview. This is the transcript.

Shaun's disability occurred due to a lack of oxygen at birth. He experienced some brain damage. Back then doctors and nurses did not describe it as an intellectual disability - they just advised me to put him into an institution. Of course I refused and took him home.

I think Shaun is able to do things he wants to do because we kept him out of the disability field. I think with disability services the staff have a low level of expectation. If you're operating in the community, you 'toe the line' according to community rules, and learn what the accepted behaviour is, but if you're parceled around in a bus with a lot of other people with a disability, you are immediately identified as somebody with a disability.

Shaun always enjoyed being part of the community, in the same way as you and I. From a very early age he regularly attended kindergarten and was a little cub and boy scout. He associated with my friends and my daughter's friends, and they were the people he went places with. When he left school I had to put up a tremendous battle to keep him out of the disability system. When he left school, they sent a taxi to pick him up to take him to the facility, and every day I said "No", not knowing what he was going to do for the rest of his life. It would have been very easy at the time to accept what they were offering, but I was determined that he wasn't going to go down the track of Adult Training and Support Services. Because of his involvement in the community he was able, with the support of his friends, to work with the gardener two days a week at a girls' college in Melbourne. He also worked at the Salvation Army Home for the Aged three days a week. Apart from that he just did all the things that you and I do.

He's always had a fair interest in racing because as a young child when we came down from Queensland we lived in Caulfield, which was near Caulfield Racecourse. It was also where some of the horses are stabled. Now that has really developed into an amazing interest for him, not that he goes to the races alone, he may go with a carer every now and then, but mostly he goes with Bruce McAvaney (OAM and sports broadcaster with the Seven Network). Shaun sits in the broadcasting box during the Melbourne Cup and he's very proud of that. He was at the Crown Casino in 2009 when 'Shocking' won the Melbourne Cup and so Shaun was invited back for the celebrations at Crown Casino.

I recently read an article written by sports journalist Caroline Wilson about how Shaun met Bruce. These are Bruce's words:

"[It's] Amazing how I've become used to him, and how I've come to rely on him. If he's not around for something, he'll tell me how I missed him." He said he needed Shaun last night "to point out the mistake I made."

Bruce is quite right. Shaun's memory is selective but quite remarkable.

Bureaucratic structure has made it more difficult for Shaun to get through security into the broadcasting boxes, but Bruce really makes an effort to ensure Shaun has a pass around his neck. This means that when Shaun's at the races, or at the football, he's always got a pass on him that says "Shaun Gallagher, Channel 7". Shaun and Bruce share a strong relationship.

As far as I'm concerned I suppose Shaun's always shown us the way. He has taught me to have faith, no matter what people tell you. He's taken risks that have really kept me awake at night, but it has led to his incredible independence now.

He went to Queensland for the football about three weeks ago. With all the teaching and learning he's done, he was able to leave his house in Port Melbourne, catch the tram into the city and get a bus to the airport. Somehow he worked his way through the difficult airport system in Brisbane, caught a train into the city and walked to his motel. Then he took a taxi down to meet Bruce at his hotel before going to the football ground. It's taken a long time of being consistent with everything that we do, but it means that now he can do it on his own – not without some anxiety from me I might add.

Shaun had a sister who very sadly died last year from cancer. It's taking a little while for us to claw our way back to the top, but it's interesting that Shaun has taken on the role of being my carer. He always asks me what I'm doing for the day, did I sleep well, all those very thoughtful things. He's really stepped up and taken on tasks he wouldn't have done before.

We go to a great deal of trouble to ensure Shaun wears top brand clothes, and he doesn't walk out the door unless he is dressed appropriately. If he wasn't, there's no way in the world he would be able to have access to the places he does. For example at the races, whatever 'day' they're celebrating, Shaun will wear the appropriate attire. There is nothing that would identify him as being any different to anyone else in the Channel 7 Broadcasting team.

Shaun has extremely good manners. Until otherwise told, he'll address people as 'Mr'. We went to the Gold Coast for a football match between Geelong and the Gold Coast Suns. When we were coming through the checkout at the airport, Shaun said to the guy, "How are you today?" and of course, that immediately opens up a whole world for everybody. If somebody says "How are you today?" you're astounded that somebody's even asking and the person responds. Therefore his personality brings pleasure into everyone's lives. He really does live quite an amazing life.

I decided the time had come that he was going to do his own washing which like most males he was very reluctant to do. So he went across to the pub and did a survey and came back and told me that nobody in the pub did their own washing, their mothers did it, or their wives did it. So I lost my point, he opens your eyes to everything.

If he gets frustrated he gets aggressive, particularly towards me. To anyone who tries to impose any authority on him, he says "How old are you," and he tells them

how they've got no right to tell him what to do. So he's quite assertive. But as I said we're careful of how he presents. That requires reminders about hair washing and shaving and teeth cleaning and he can't do buttons on shirts up, so there has to be someone there to do that. He can't do ties up either and I've become an expert at tying ties now. But the shirt has to be ironed. Right now I'm working towards him being able to manage all this without me, so we've got a lot of care supports in place. There's somebody to do his ironing, she comes once a week, and there's cleaners who come for four hours. He also now travels down to one of the big golf courses here, Thirteenth Beach, and is having golf lessons down there.

The reason behind all these things is that he goes to the pub and meets so many people, and they're his protection in the community. If he goes down to Thirteenth Beach people know him, and so they carry on conversations with him and he extends his circle of friends even further, particularly in the racing fraternity. He knows most jockeys and certainly many trainers. It's required us to take an incredible number of risks, but it certainly paid off.

I've just bought a house and Shaun is living with me. I live upstairs and he lives downstairs so he's got his area and I've got my own area. He was in his own house but it appears as if the only person that was trained was me. I think that a lot of people talk about people living independently but many forget how lonely it can be to live independently.

I also recently got a dog and that's opened many more doors, because if you take a dog for a walk in the park everybody talks to you, and that's exactly what's happened. Shaun walks with the dog, it's good for him to exercise, and it's great for him to meet people in the area. Everyone knows him and everybody knows the dog. I think it's been about six months since we've been in this new house, which has just expanded his friends even further.

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