

THE Advocate

A VOICE FOR ACCESSIBLE, EQUITABLE AND EMPOWERED LIVES | 2021 SPRING ISSUE

“Creativity
takes
courage”

HENRI MATISSE

THE ARTS ISSUE

Aerial and adaptive
artist, Lauren Watson
is putting a new spin
on wheelchair art



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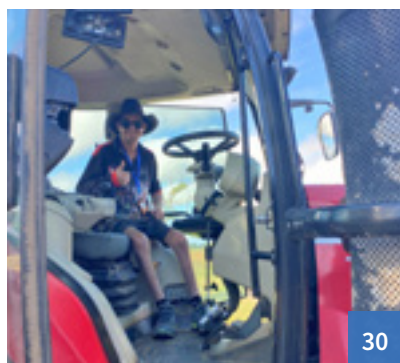
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FROM THE CEO

Celebrating disability in the arts



Welcome to the spring edition of *The Advocate*.

Our last edition focused on the impact that our Paralympians have made to the world of sport and I was delighted to see Team Australia do so well in Tokyo, during an especially challenging year.

Continuing with a theme, this edition celebrates the contributions that our community has made to the arts, including the performing arts, music and the visual arts. I hope you enjoy this special arts focus, including interviews with opera singer Tim McCallum, artist Steve Williams, and adaptive performing artist and aerial instructor (and our cover star!), Lauren Watson.

At the end of June we kicked off our campaign to support our members over the age of 65 who are dealing with significant disparities in funding compared with those who are eligible for the NDIS.

We've been engaged at most senior levels of government on this important

issue, and have designed and funded the campaign to put maximum pressure on government to give better support to our over 65s. As I write this we have reached more than 12.8 million Australians with our campaign message, and achieved nearly 20,000 signatures on our online petition.

If you haven't already, please visit DisabilityDoesntDiscriminate.com.au to sign the petition. We still have a way to go to achieve our end goal of ending age discrimination, but we are determined to do it!

Finally, I would like to say huge well done to our staff. More than 70 people from the Spinal Life Australia team participated in the Jetty2Jetty 3km race that was held in July. It was great to see the community engaging with our Spinal Life information tent and getting to know more about what we do. We also worked alongside the Jetty2Jetty staff to introduce a brand new race category: a 10km wheelchair race. It ran in conjunction with the existing 10km run/walk, with an elite wave of wheelchair athletes taking on the scenic course. Congratulations to everyone who participated and see you at the Jetty2Jetty next year!

MARK TOWNEND

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Accessible Australia

Have you bookmarked our fab app yet?

Here at Spinal Life Australia, we love new technology and anything that can help improve the quality of our customers lives.

We've seen how some products can have a wide-reaching, positive impact on the lives of people with a disability; supporting and empowering them by making everyday things just that little bit easier.

And, in case you haven't heard about it already, we've actually developed one of these tools ourselves!

Our Accessible Australia app was launched last year. This incredible resource has a single goal: to make Australia more accessible for people with mobility challenges.

So how does it all work? Here's a quick guide:

What is it?

The Accessible Australia app provides information that will give people with a disability the confidence to explore the country.

There are loads of apps out there already that give you helpful information about businesses, services and attractions. But the Accessible Australia app also lets you know how suitable they are for people with a disability – everything from ease of access to whether they have accessible parking and toilets.

You'll find accessibility information on everything from restaurants, cafés, bars and shopping centres, to beaches, parks, public bathrooms and accommodation options. The list is long and keeps on growing.

It's a must if you're planning an outing or a getaway – or just wanting the freedom to go about your everyday life with a sense of confidence because you'll feel armed with all the information you need.

How does it work?

The app is completely free and web-based, so you access it just as you would any other website.

Simply go to accessibleaustralia.com.au, set your location and select the type of business or service you're looking for (they're grouped into categories like food and drink, entertainment, health and travel etc).

Everything that comes up within that category in your chosen area will then be displayed as a list of places, or as locations on the map.

You can also filter the results based on the accessibility rating, the service rating (which relates to the overall experience) or even mobility type, so you can see reviews by people who use the same mobility aids as you.

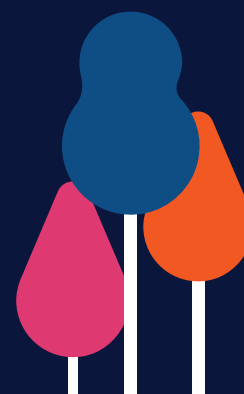
Who writes the reviews?

You do! Every review you write will help others, and help to create the best accessibility resource in the country.

Your reviews will join others written by your peers, so that visitors to the app can make more informed decisions about everything from where to stay, which beach to visit or which tourist attractions are accessible.

Please feel free to leave as many detailed reviews and ratings as you can – the Accessible Australia app is a living, growing thing that *needs* you to share your first-hand experiences. [A](#)

Want to “know before you go” and help create a more accessible Australia? Head to accessibleaustralia.com.au to read reviews and share your own!





Defying Gravity

Lauren Watson discovered aerial performing after breaking her back at the age of 19. Wheelchair or not, she's pushing the limits of what the physical body can do.

Visitors to this year's Undercover Artist Festival, Australia's signature arts and disability festival, were treated to an exhilarating performance.

Nerve is an aerial theatre show by Gold Coast-based adaptive performing artist and aerial instructor, Lauren Watson. She created it to "challenge society's expectations of people with disability, and start a conversation about how we can all advocate for artists with disability in Australia".

To find out more, we spoke to Lauren during rehearsals for this exciting world premiere.

Take us back to the start of this journey...

I was 19 and living in the Shoalhaven, about three hours south of Sydney. A group of us went for a drive in the bush, the driver lost control of the car and we hit a tree. We weren't going very fast, but I was in the middle and wearing one of those seatbelts that only go across your lap. There were five of us in the car, but I was the



only one who got hurt and it was because of that belt. I broke my back and my diagnosis was complete paraplegia. I couldn't move or feel anything from my ribcage down, apart from a little feeling in my right leg. But it was so hypersensitive that even a sheet on it felt like bricks. I was in hospital for eight months, mostly in the spinal unit, doing rehab and learning how to use a wheelchair.

What happened next?

After a couple of years I started getting a little bit of movement back and the diagnosis was changed to incomplete paraplegia. I started going to physio, but I kept plateauing – sometimes for months, sometimes for years. The longest was five years. I just wasn't ready, psychologically. It's weird: you'd think getting some movement back would make you elated, but it was actually overwhelming. I was 19 and had somewhat come to terms with being in a wheelchair. It was terrifying to think that my life could be about to change all over again.

What finally helped you?

I went on a road trip with a friend and she suggested we go to Nimbin to visit an old friend. While we were there, we met a woman on the main street who was doing tarot cards. I didn't believe in any of that, but my friend thought it would be a laugh, so we decided to go for it. The woman said to me: "You know, you're not supposed to be in a wheelchair forever. You'll get to a point, at around the 10-year mark, when you'll start getting out of your chair". I remember being shocked by her audacity, but I didn't really take it in and just went on with my life. Later, my then-partner and I moved to Queensland, and as it got closer to that 10-year mark I remembered the words of the woman from Nimbin. I still didn't really believe them, but I thought that if it *was* going to happen, I'd have to start doing something about it! So that's when I started thinking about what I could do.

How did you discover aerial arts?

I was looking for something that was fun and involved working really hard on your body. I considered martial arts and surfing, but then I happened to see an aerial demo on the Gold Coast: the sort of thing they do in Cirque du Soleil. It was really beautiful and obviously challenging. And I just thought: "Oh my God, this is it: this is the thing I'm going to do".

What does it involve?

I started with aerial hammock, which is a fabric doubled over and hung from the ceiling so you can lie in it and do all sorts of stretches and movements. Later, I branched out and tried other things, including harness, bungee and lyra, which is a



Lauren is an adaptive performing artist, aerial instructor and, above all, a storyteller

steel hoop that's great, but hurts a lot! I've also danced on a wall and on a trampoline. In *Nerve* I perform with one of my wheelchairs actually in the air.

How much movement did you have when you started?

I could move my legs a little by that stage, but I didn't have a lot of control over them. I could also stand up for three seconds, but only using my arms to support my weight: my strength was pretty much all in the upper body. I had no muscle memory, so I had to train my brain to start learning again. It was a long, slow process and very tiring.

When did you start performing?

I did my first performance two years after I started aerial work, when I felt comfortable and confident enough to >

perform for three to four minutes. When I was younger, before my accident, I was a guitarist in a band and used to perform a lot. I missed that buzz of being on stage. But I finally found the thing to fill the hole I had after losing music.

What are some of the physical benefits?

My circulation has got a lot better, and I definitely don't have as much pain as I used to. I've also built up strength in my core. I've noticed that with some of my students, too. Once they start training, their cores get stronger so they can sit up better and are able to move around more easily. But the mental side is just as important as the physical side. Movement not only keeps me healthy, but it also fills my soul.

What's been the highlight of your aerial career so far?

Performing a season for the Commonwealth Games Festival on the Gold Coast with an ensemble called Circus Corridor. It was probably the hardest thing I think I've ever done, but it's something I hold very dear to my heart. I will never forget that show: it's ingrained in my body.

If you could work with any artist, who would it be?

Dreya Weber, an American aerialist choreographer who's had an amazing career working with huge names like P!nk, Taylor Swift, Rihanna and so many more. I've done some workshops and private lessons with her, and she's someone I really look up to. She's just so cool. If I ever think: "I'm too old to do this," I remember that Dreya is still working and still kicking ass, and she's at least 10 years older than me [editor's note: she's 20 years older!]. I'd also love to work again with an Australian contemporary dance artist and choreographer called Ashleigh Musk. I've worked with her twice before, and she's incredibly talented and inspiring.

Tell us about *Nerve*

It's an autobiographical aerial theatre show that looks at my experience of becoming disabled, all through movement. It's a look at what life is like for people living with a disability and some of the struggles we face as we navigate a world

where everything's new and challenging. There's grief and happiness and trauma and discrimination – and hopefully a few moments of humour! It's the journey that I've gone on, from having the accident to where I am now. It's all been funded by a \$10,000 Achievement Award that I won through Access Arts, so it's pretty exciting. I really hope it's not a one-off: my plans are to have it shown at a lot more festivals and venues, but it's a very physically demanding show, so we'll see. But I worked way too hard to just do it once!

What do you do when you're not performing?

I do a lot of advocacy work for disability arts and disabilities in general, and I consult on access and inclusion plans within the arts. I also teach. There's a wonderful studio on the Gold Coast called Hapy Studio hapy.com.au, owned by Carly Page. Together, we started a programme called Adaptive Aerial Arts. It's one-on-one training that lets people with disabilities of any type try aerial arts in a safe space where they'll feel confident and comfortable. We'll have a conversation about who they are, and then talk about their goals, mobility and anything they might be afraid of. And then the work starts: warming up, working the muscles and building up confidence. So many able-bodied people try aerial and say to us: "I'm not strong enough; I'll come back after I've gone to the gym and got stronger". But this is the gym. It's just the creative gym!

So, what's next?

I'd love to continue creating more of my own projects, like *Nerve*, but not necessarily with me as the solo artist. I'd like to step back from the performing side of things and work with other artists who live with disabilities and want to start a career in the performing arts. My long-term goal is to be able to facilitate an ensemble. And while *Nerve* is about my disability, going forward I'll definitely focus on other things, because people need to see artists with disabilities as artists first. **A**

To find out more, go to laurenwatsonaerial.com or undercoverartistfest.com

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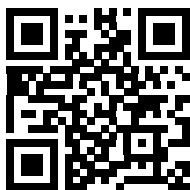
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The show must go on

Being on wheels hasn't stopped Tim McCallum from being a star

When we made the decision to have an arts theme in this issue of *The Advocate*, we knew there was one person we absolutely had to include: Tim McCallum.

As a Peer Support Officer he's not just an integral part of the Spinal Life Australia team, he's also an accomplished opera singer with a number of incredible gigs to his name, including performing on Channel 9's *The Voice* in 2015, performing across northern Italy for the Pavarotti Foundation in 2013, and singing the national anthem at last year's AFL grand final.

So what's the story behind this warbler on wheels?
We asked Tim to tell us more about his incredible life:

The accident

In 1999, when I was 18, I was just about to start a musical theatre course at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA). But then I went swimming, dived over a wave, hit a sand bar and broke my neck. It left me paralysed from the chest down, with only partial use of my arms.

Singing once more

The cafeteria at the Shenton Park Rehabilitation Hospital in Perth is where I had my first post-accident singing lesson, thanks to the music teacher from WAAPA, Derek Bond. He kept coming to the hospital every day to see how I was and encourage me to continue having music in my life. After six weeks on my back in Halo traction I'd only just got into my chair that week. They wheeled me into the cafeteria, where there was a piano, and the first song I sang was "Pure Imagination" from *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*. The lyrics were so poignant: "Anything you want to, do it. Want to change the world? There's nothing to it". It was a moment that really reignited the flame for me. I truly don't think I would have continued to follow my dream of being a performer if it weren't for Derek's support.

Finding my voice

Initially, I had all of the complications and limitations that C4 high-level quadriplegics experience. I could no longer control the muscles below my level of injury, and I couldn't hold my breath or get any power or volume.

The turning point came purely by accident. I was trying to rehearse a song but couldn't get a high note, and in sheer frustration pushed away from my desk. I thought that my wheelchair brakes were off, but they weren't. So when I pushed, my arms gave me leverage to push down on my diaphragm, and I let out the most almighty yell. I had discovered a way to push the air out of my body and create the volume I needed.

Back in the spotlight

A few months after my accident I moved back home to Geelong and did my first show: a State School Spectacular at the Melbourne Tennis Centre. I was actually still in rehab when I was asked to take part in the show, which remains one of my proudest performances because there was so much riding on it. It wasn't just a small family concert, it was in front of 13,000 people and I needed to entertain them. But I had to get night leave from the rehab hospital first!

After that I performed in all sorts of productions. But I still had to audition and earn my place on the stage: I wasn't gifted any roles. It was great because it showed me that the arts industry was going to treat me as an artist first, rather than someone with a disability.

The call of Canada

In 2010, I had the opportunity to audition for Cirque du Soleil in Montreal. It was a big risk for my wife and me to pack up our lives and move overseas in order to follow a dream, but Melissa's always been an incredible supporter of mine and so off we went.

I wasn't offered a contract with Cirque du Soleil, but it's still the best audition I've ever done without it being a success, and it was an experience I'll never forget. We decided to stay anyway, and spent two years travelling across Canada and the USA. Melissa got some work, and I had an amazing opportunity to record an opera CD and do some fun gigs, but during the tougher times I started busking. I'll never forget making \$80 in my first outing, and thinking, "Well, at least we'll never go hungry".

Busking in Brisbane

After two years in Canada, we moved to Brissie to be close to family and friends, and enjoy the fantastic weather. It was here that I became a professional busker. For the first four or five years, busking at South Bank was my main source of income, and contributed to paying off our mortgage and our loans. It was physically challenging work and I'd sometimes sing for six hours straight. But it helped me become the artist that I am today, with a strong instrument and the ability to sing at the drop of a hat, in any conditions.

After a few years of busking I did *The Voice*, which raised my profile and led to more great work, before the AFL grand final gig came up last year. It was a surreal experience and definitely one of my favourite gigs ever. I'd lost a lot of work thanks to COVID, but I looked at this time as another challenge. I built a studio in my house and started doing some online concerts and recordings, including a Christmas album which was released last year and debuted at number eight on the ARIA Charts – it was a dream come true.

What are you up to now?

I'm performing at the Undercover Artist Festival, which is one of Australia's most prominent disability arts festivals and features artists from all over Australia performing everything from dance and poetry to comedy and music. I've been itching to work with a fellow performer by the name of Tony Dee, so during the COVID lockdown I sat down and wrote us a two-man show. Tony and I are both big lovers of the Rat Pack – and Tony is basically the reincarnation of Frank Sinatra, just on wheels – so it's a cabaret-style swing/jazz night featuring some of our favourites songs from crooners like Frank Sinatra, Michael Buble, Tony Bennett and Harry Connick Jr.

Beyond that, International Day of People with Disability in early December brings lots of opportunities, and then I have some big Christmas gigs, and quite a big deal in the New Year. I can't announce anything at this time, so it's a bit of a "watch this space" moment! [A](#)

To find out more, go to timmccallum.com.au or undercoverartistfest.com



TIM'S FAVES

Dream gig?

The opening ceremony at the Olympics would be pretty amazing. But the ultimate dream for me has always been playing the *Phantom in Phantom of the Opera*.

Duet dream?

It's going to have to be a trio, not a duo: me with John Farnham and Anthony Warlow. I grew up idolising both of those singers.

Dream venue?

It would have to be a Broadway theatre. I don't even care which one. I would just love to be in a long-running show that I could do every night for the rest of my life.

Favourite musical of all time?

It has to be *Les Mis*. I've performed in it myself before, and I've got a huge love and admiration for that show.

Favourite piece of opera music?

I love anything by Puccini and anything sung by the Swedish tenor, Jussi Bjorling.

Favourite karaoke song?

"I Saw Her Standing There," by the Beatles.

Favourite song to perform in "Swinging & Spinning"?

"My Way" – everyone knows it, but I think it really typifies the type of journeys that Tony and I have both lived.



Kiss from a rose

How drawing a flower was Steve Williams' first step to a new career

If you ask Stephen Williams what his favourite flower is, chances are he'll tell you it's a rose.

That's because it was a rose that helped Steve find the new lease of life he was looking for.

Steve lives with his wife, Alicia, and their two gorgeous girls, aged three and seven. The 36-year-old is a C5/C6 complete quadriplegic, thanks to an accident on a buck's weekend at age 25, when he dove off a retaining wall into shallow water.

In the years after his accident, Steve not only had to navigate his new world, but also deal with guilt for the pain he believed he caused his family.

The former concreter struggled to find a job.

"I was looking for any type of work, literally anything," says Steve, "but every lead we followed was a dead end. I just couldn't get work anywhere. I was really depressed as I found it difficult to sit at home all day on my own."

That's when Alicia stepped in and encouraged her partner of 17 years to pick up a pencil and draw her a rose. This simple suggestion proved to be the beginning of something very special.

"She just thought it would help fill in the day and keep my mind occupied," says Steve. "So I gave it a go." What prompted him to *keep* going was Alicia's positive reaction to this first drawing.

"I scribbled, but I never did art at school," says Steve. "So after learning how to hold a pencil again, I basically taught myself how to draw thanks to YouTube videos."

Today, Steve is renowned for his exquisitely detailed black-and-white drawings.

It took him a number of years to hone his craft, and for anyone else with a spinal cord injury thinking about taking up drawing, Steve stresses that it's all about persistence: "Don't stop. If you're passionate about it, just keep going: it will come with time."

And as he progressed, people started approaching Steve for commissions. He's currently working on a drawing of an F100 ute, while next on the list is a Sandman panel van, followed by the local church for a couple who got married there.

His favourite things to draw, however, are native animals.

"They're my passion – they're what I focus on when I don't

“Drawing has really helped me. It gave me something meaningful to do.”



have commission work to do,” he says. “I used to be a real outdoors person and just love nature.”

His favourite drawing to date is a black cockatoo [pictured above] which he was inspired to draw after a visit to “a mate’s place in Tumba” (aka the small town of Tumbarumba). “It’s meaningful to me,” says Steve, “because it reminded me of growing up out there, with all the birds.”

He draws most days, for up to four hours. “After that, I get knots in my shoulders and notice I start making mistakes,” he says. With the John Butler Trio often playing in the background, he works at his home studio: “We built it when we moved: Alicia was sick of me taking up the kitchen table!”

When it comes to commissions, Steve is in demand, and with each original drawing taking two to three months to complete, it comes as no surprise to hear that he’s booked out until the end of 2022. Luckily, prints of his stunning works are also available, via his new website and a Facebook shop.

“Drawing has really helped me,” says the talented artist. “It gave me something meaningful to do, and I love seeing the joy or emotion that a piece of artwork that I’ve created can bring to someone’s face. I just love seeing people’s reactions to my work.”

Steve with some happy commission customers



The reaction of one special person is something Steve is looking forward to: “I’m planning to do a drawing of my deceased Pop, for my Nan,” he says. “They are both my idols; both so caring and passionate to all family members. I’ve really wanted to do this drawing for a long time, but it brings up a lot of emotions. I will get it done, though.” [A](#)

Steve’s artwork can be seen and purchased through his Facebook page: [stevewilliams_art](#), on Instagram: [stevewilliams_art](#), or from his new website: [stevewilliamsart.net](#)



Cultural Cairns

The largest city in Far North Queensland is also home to arts centres, events and festivals that are accessible, wheelchair-friendly – and great fun

Ah, Cairns. The gateway to Tropical North Queensland is famous for its proximity to dreamy beaches, ancient rainforests and the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef, but did you know that it also buzzes with arts and culture?

Continuing with our arts theme this issue, we're highlighting some of the great artistic and cultural things to do in and around Cairns. That's because the city is also home to Spinal Life Australia's Healthy Living Centre – a fully accessible wellness centre, with facilities and specialist services to support people with spinal cord damage.

So if you're planning a visit to the Centre and feel like a bit of an accessible cultural distraction, you'll be all set.

VISUAL ARTS

Cairns Art Gallery

The Cairns Art Gallery is located in one of the few remaining heritage buildings in Cairns, right next to the lagoon and boardwalk. Here, you can enjoy regional, national and international art exhibitions, with a particular focus on local and indigenous works of art. There's also a gallery shop and a great cafe. cairnsartgallery.com.au

Cairns Art Society (CAS)

The oldest art society in the region, the CAS features artists from all across Far North Queensland, working in everything from painting, drawing and printing to sculpture, textiles and digital. Their works are showcased in two galleries: one at the DFO shopping centre and Artists@Work Studio & Gallery in the CBD. The Society also runs art classes and workshops, and holds two major exhibitions every year. cairnsartsociety.com

Crate 59

Supporting local young and emerging contemporary artists, Crate 59 features a gallery, nine resident artists' studios and Billy's Coffee, home to "Cairns' favourite smiling barista". So you can sip a latte while you browse the gallery!

crate59.com

Cairns Esplanade Public Art

You don't have to go into a gallery to see art in Cairns. There are sculptures dotted throughout the Cairns Esplanade parklands and around the famous Lagoon, including 'The Woven Fish'. These iconic pieces were created for the Esplanade redevelopment in 2003, and have since become a kind of unofficial symbol of Cairns.

cairns.qld.gov.au/esplanade

PERFORMING ARTS

Cairns Convention Centre

This world-class venue hosts lots of conferences and business events, but it also features some great entertainment, such as the May 2022 gig by multi ARIA award-winning star of *The Voice*, Guy Sebastian. cairnsconvention.com.au

Cairns Performing Arts Centre

The Cairns Civic Theatre, which opened in 1973 and was the first purpose-built theatre in regional Queensland, was demolished a few years ago to make way for the Performing Arts Centre, which opened in 2018. It's home to comedy, dance, drama, circus and more, including upcoming performances by Kate Miller-Heidke, Kasey Chambers and Abba tribute band, Bjorn Again, as well as classics from London's West End and New York's Broadway in "The World of Musicals". cairns.qld.gov.au/CPAC

Tanks Arts Centre

This unique Heritage-Listed site takes its name from three WWII naval oil storage tanks. They're located right next to the lush Cairns Botanic Gardens and have been transformed into a multi-use contemporary arts centre where you can enjoy live music, performances, visual arts, workshops, market days and more. tanksartscentre.com

Bulmba-ja

Previously, Bulmba-ja (meaning "house" or "place" in Yidinji and Yirrganydji languages) was the Cairns Centre of Contemporary Arts. These days it's a theatre, gallery and creative development space that focuses on showcasing the unique stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. arts.qld.gov.au/bulmba-ja

FESTIVALS

Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF)

This unique three-day event merges an art fair with a celebration of Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. It encompasses art, craft, fashion, dance, music, theatre, film, and children's programs, as well as an art market, artist talks, symposiums and workshops. Events take place at various places across Cairns, including the Cairns Convention Centre, Tanks Arts Centre and the Cairns Cruise Liner Terminal. Thanks to COVID, this year's festival (which is usually held in August) has been delayed until 10-14 November, so you haven't missed it! ciaf.com.au

Cairns Festival

Running since 1961, this annual 10-day celebration of art, culture and the beauty of living in tropical north Queensland is the biggest event on the Cairns calendar. There's music, art, theatre, dance, film, comedy, drama, photography and more, as well as film nights, fireworks, a family concert and the Grand Parade on the Cairns Esplanade. The Festival's already happened this year, so start planning for 2022! cairns.qld.gov.au/festival

Carnival on Collins

This annual street party is the fun finale to the Cairns Festival, and also a Father's Day tradition. Located in the Cairns Botanic Gardens, you can wander through and enjoy

market stalls offering art and craft, produce, plants, food and refreshments, as well as roving performers, busking artists and art exhibitions. cairns.qld.gov.au

Cairns Tropical Writers Festival

Bringing together locally based writers and Australian and internationally revered authors, highlights of this festival include a local book fair, book launches and author meet and greets. The next Cairns Tropical Writers Festival will take place in winter 2022. cairnstropicalwritersfestival.com

FILM

End Credits Film Club

This not-for-profit film club organises screenings of non-mainstream films, current and classic independent movies, and arthouse films, in a variety of locations around Cairns. Don't miss the Starry Night Cinema, an outdoor screening program held regularly from July to December in the Cairns Botanic Gardens. endcredits.org.au

Understory Film Festival

Cairns' very own short film festival encourages local independent, student, emerging and professional film makers to create short films and enter them into a competition to win screening opportunities, awards and prizes. It all culminates in an annual red carpet event: this year held on 20 November. cairns.qld.gov.au/facilities-sport-leisure/arts-culture/understory-film-festival

Travelling Film Festival

Founded by David Stratton in 1974, this is Australia's longest-running travelling film festival. It showcases Australian and international features, documentaries and short films, and provides audiences in regional Australia – including Cairns – with access to films they wouldn't otherwise get to see on the big screen. According to the website TFF is coming back to Cairns this year: check the website for confirmed dates. sff.org.au/tff

As we all know, things can change at a moment's notice in the world of COVID, so always double-check before visiting any of these arts centres, events and festivals. To find out more about the Healthy Living Centre, visit: spinalhealthyliving.com.au

The ultimate nose job

Could the nerves in your nose help in the repair of spinal cord injuries?

Professor James St John [left] is Head of the Clem Jones Centre for Neurobiology and Stem Cell Research, where their work in olfactory cell transplantation could revolutionise how spinal injuries are treated

The front page of an old newspaper hangs on the laboratory wall of Professor, James St John.

It's from July 1969 and shows Neil Armstrong making his giant leap for mankind.

To James, it represents a time when the community came together in order to achieve one monumental goal: to walk on the moon. Tens of thousands of people and billions of dollars later, they did it.

"If only we had the same approach to spinal cord injury repair," says James. "We also could achieve a monumental goal – and, I think, we could do it pretty quickly."

James is head of the Spinal Injury Project team at the Clem Jones Centre for Neurobiology and Stem Cell Research. At their bases at Griffith University in Brisbane and the Gold Coast, James' team is doing world-leading research into spinal cord injury repair.

It centres on olfactory cell therapy – so what does this mean and how does it work?

“

This is just the start and we're keeping an open mind. We're not ruling anything out.

”

"Everyone now knows that COVID-19 can cause some people to lose their sense of smell," says James. "That's because it attacks the lining of the nose, where the nerve cells are. The nerve cells die off, but can regenerate over time thanks to things called glial cells. The nerve cells are the cars that drive along the road, but you have to make the road first, and that's the glial cells. In simple terms, we take these glial cells from the patient's nose, purify them, and then put

them back into the patient. But this time we put them into a different part of their body: the spinal cord. This then helps neurones regrow across the injury site."

The concept's been around since the 1990s, and James' mentor, Professor Alan Mackay-Sim, was actually named Australian of the Year in 2017 thanks to his work in this field, when he showed that transplanting these cells into the spinal cord was safe for humans.

Today, one of the major differences in the Spinal Injury Project's work is the focus they're placing on the crucial process of rehabilitation.

"Cell transplantation alone will not be enough," explains James. "Even if we can repair the damage and get full function recovery with cell transplantations, it will still take a long time for connections to be rewired – just as a baby takes years to learn how to walk and talk. We need to combine this treatment with a proper, intensive rehabilitation program, and the reality is that we just don't have one in Australia. So, we're trying to work out what's needed. From a neuroscience point of view, however, anything is better than nothing. The more you move, the more chance you have."

In similar programs around the world, some people do six hours of rehab a day, every day. But how do you keep someone motivated to continue with intensive rehabilitation when it may work, or it may not work? James and his team recently called for expressions of interest from people to start a rehab trial in Australia, but are only asking them to do two hours a day, five days a week for four months.

"We're dealing with the unknown here, because we simply don't know how much rehabilitation is required," says James. "Maybe they don't need six hours a day; >



The all-important cells
under a microscope

maybe two hours is enough. It depends on their lifestyles as well as their injuries. Do they have a job? Do they have support from family and carers? This is just the start and we're keeping an open mind. We're not ruling anything out."

Constantly seeking feedback and suggestions from the community is another reason the approach of James and his team is so different.

"We need to be guided by the community, so we can make sure our aims are in alignment with reality and with what people really want," explains James. "If you asked people with a spinal cord injury the number one thing that they want, it would probably be the ability to control their bowel and bladder. Number two might be to feel again, and then later on maybe to move a finger. Ultimately we want the full restoration of function, but that's still a long way off. For now, it's small but life-changing achievements first. We're also trying to make this therapy accessible to everyone by making it as cheap as possible."

The team is trying to do things as fast as they can, but they have to do everything carefully and every step takes a long time. It's frustrating, but that's the way it is.

"My Dad is my inspiration," says James. "He was a gastroenterologist and researcher, and was instrumental in getting the bowel cancer screening program working in Australia. His mother-in-law, my grandmother, died of bowel cancer and he thought it was ridiculous that there was no test. And so he spent his whole career working to make that happen. I'd love to be able to do something similar, and help develop a therapy that can help people with a spinal cord injury. Even if our cell transplantation is not successful, our approach might be useful for other research groups, and they might be able to piggyback on some of our learnings and procedures. At the end of the day, a combination of therapies is probably going to be needed, and I'd love to see ours in the mix. Ultimately, I would like to be able to see a person who's had this therapy walk again."

It will be one small step for a man (or woman), but it will be an achievement as astounding as the moon landing. [A](#)

Learn more about the amazing Spinal Injury Project team at griffith.edu.au/clem-jones-centre



CATCH UP WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

Our Peer Support catch-ups are held across Queensland and Western Australia, guided by the latest advice from health authorities in response to COVID-19. Keep an eye on Facebook and our website for updates on upcoming events, including online opportunities. If you'd like to connect with our Peer Support, Post Polio or Transverse Myelitis Groups in your region, please use the contact details below.

Spinal Life Peer Support Groups

BRIEBIE ISLAND: Bill Peacock on 0403 686 998.
Combined with Post Polio group.

BRISBANE: Ross Duncan on 0475 077 080.

BUNDABERG: Pat Allison on 4153 1005.

CAIRNS: Sam James on 1300 774 625.
Combined with Post Polio group.

FRASER COAST: Sam James on 1300 774 625.

IPSWICH: Eric Rushton on 0403 191 698.

MACKAY: Ross Duncan on 0475 077 080.

MORETON BAY: Ross Duncan on 0475 077 080.

ROCKHAMPTON: Robynne Clifton on 0473 576 107
or Anne Guthrie on 0407 116 035.

TOOWOOMBA: Wendy Adams on 0422 799 580.
Combined with Post Polio group.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA: Aileen Ward on 0420 985 734.

Post Polio Groups

CAIRNS: Joy Hay on 4055 5795.

GOLD COAST: Lyn Glover on 0448 206 856
or Joan Radanovic on 0413 178 073.

SUNSHINE COAST: Cathy Newman on 5447 6608.

TOWNSVILLE: Eric Collins on 4729 0275.

Transverse Myelitis Group

Contact Jodi Gallon on 0451 235 860

Join our community today at spinal.com.au/membership
or call 1300 774 625 to find out more.

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A suite stay

A hotel in Brisbane is leading the way in accessible accommodation

Brisbane's South Bank is famous for its stunning riverside location, lush parklands, fantastic restaurants and a vibrant cultural precinct that's home to, among others, the Queensland Performing Arts Centre and Gallery of Modern Art.

There are few spots in the city with a better location for a hotel. How fantastic, then, that it's home to a hotel offering spacious, contemporary and disability-friendly accommodation.

Located just one street away from the Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre, and a couple of blocks from the entertainment district of South Bank, the Novotel Brisbane South Bank is the perfect base for anyone visiting on business or wanting to explore the River City.

We spoke to the hotel's Digital Marketing Manager, Mark Wayper, and Guest Relations and Concierge Manager, Perry Yiannakis, to get the lowdown on this four-and-a-half star, family-friendly, *accessible* oasis.

What motivated you to make your hotel accessible for people with a disability?

Mark: "The owners, a group of Brisbane-based Taiwanese families, have owned this piece of land ever since Expo 88. They're very hands-on and it's the first hotel they've ever built, so they put a lot of thought and effort into the design. For example, all of the furniture was handmade especially for the hotel, and before building even began they actually set up prototypes of rooms in a shipping container and worked out where everything would go. They're astute businesspeople, but they're also just lovely, genuine family-orientated people, and the fact that the hotel has so many

accessible rooms is completely by design: they just wanted to be able to welcome everyone.

What kind of changes did you do to make your hotel more accessible?

Mark: The hotel only opened in 2018 and was completely purpose-built, so there have been no changes or retrofitting. Everything is by design. There are 238 rooms in total, and 11 of these have been specially designed for guests with disabilities. So as well as smart TVs, Wi-Fi, Google Chromecast, USB ports and all of the things you'd expect in a hotel of this calibre, they also feature things like wide entries, fully appointed accessible bathrooms and switch-operated automated curtains that open to reveal lovely park or city views.

Perry: "The bathrooms are spacious and feature a shower seat, height-adjustable shower and lever taps, as well as a wheelchair-accessible sink and grab rails for the shower and loo. Everything's been carefully considered, so the desks and mini bar fridges are at the right height, the wardrobes let people in wheelchairs hang things easily, at eye level, and there's enough clearance under the beds in order to be to accommodate a hoist."

Mark: "One of the best and most helpful features is that all 11 accessible rooms have the option of an interconnecting room, so you can travel easily with family members or a support worker."

What other elements do you think make the Novotel South Bank attractive for people with accessibility issues?

Perry: "The ability to move easily throughout the hotel.





It's not just these 11 rooms that have wheelchair access: from the bar and restaurant, the meetings and event spaces, and the pool area, there's good access from the moment you enter the hotel. It's very, very well thought out. We also have four accessible car spaces right outside our elevators, so people can park, get out of their car and into the elevator, and literally go straight to their floor, where we can check them in. I've worked in a number of hotels in Brisbane and overseas, and while you might expect this to be a fairly obvious and standard offering, it's sadly rare. We also have a swimming pool with a built-in electric seated Aqua Creek Pool Ranger hoist. So guests with accessibility issues can get in and out of the pool to do rehabilitation work or just enjoy being in a lovely pool that's heated all year-round to a very comfortable 27°C."

How are you different to other hotels?

Mark: "Most hotels in Brisbane are very, very limited when it comes to accessible rooms – they only do what's necessary to comply with building codes. I know of hotels with many more rooms than ours with as few as just two accessible rooms available for guests. The percentage is not good. Our electric pool hoist is also something that sets us apart from most other hotels in Brisbane."

Why should improving accessibility be a focus for businesses?

Mark: "So many people aren't geared to catering for people with disabilities, so they're missing out on a massive opportunity. The Novotel South Bank is one of a few 'next generation' Novotel hotels, so it was always about doing things differently, going the extra mile and thinking about things from the guest's perspective. Plus, it just makes good business sense. For example, even though



the purpose of the interconnecting rooms is to offer a safe and easy space for anyone travelling with support staff, they can be used by others as well. With the Mater Hospital just down the road, someone might be recovering from a surgery and request a room because their leg's in a cast and they're in a wheelchair. The interconnecting rooms give us great flexibility."

What feedback do you get regarding having an accessible hotel?

Mark: "Last year, in the Property Council of Australia Innovation & Excellence Awards, we were named the Best Tourism and Leisure Development of 2020. And our accessible features certainly were part of the submission."

Perry: "And we know that people are happy, because we have so many returning guests! We pride ourselves on gaining their loyalty through our service, but the facilities are just as important. And they love that we have such easy rooms and are in such a good location." **A**

For bookings and more information about the Novotel South Bank, go to novotelbrisbanesouthbank.com.au

A new way to find disability services and support for everyday life



The Australian Government's new Disability Gateway is a free, Australia-wide service dedicated to helping people living with disability, and their families and carers, find trusted information and services.

The Disability Gateway includes a website, phone line and a Facebook page to help connect people to the right disability information and services.

One new user is 22-year-old Maya, who has a physical disability from a spinal cord injury at birth.

Maya lives with her parents, but finds and chooses her own disability support services. She'd like to move into her own home in the future and will use the Disability Gateway to help her make this transition.

"I'd like to move out of my family home soon, so information on housing, rights and equipment is what interests me," says Maya.

"The Disability Gateway has links to practical services like equipment hire and wheelchair ramps, but also information about bigger issues, like my rights as a tenant if I need to modify a rental property," she explains.

One of the faces of the advertising campaign helping to promote the Disability Gateway is Eric Brown. He's a proud Yuin, Gundungarra man with a disability who competes at an elite level internationally in Crossfit.

Eric encourages all Indigenous people with disability to use the Disability Gateway to find the information they need to live positive lives and be the best they can be.

"Having information at hand could possibly assist our people to access services early on," he says.

"Making targeted information more easily accessible will empower my people to be able to better support themselves and their loved ones."

Visit disabilitygateway.gov.au or call 1800 643 787 from 8am to 8pm AEST, Monday to Friday.



The Disability Gateway is here.



The Disability Gateway is here. It's helping connect people with disability, as well as their families, friends and carers, to the information and services they need.

**Visit disabilitygateway.gov.au
or call 1800 643 787**

Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm AEST/AEDT

Authorised by the Australian Government, Canberra.



Australian Government



**Disability
Gateway**
Connecting you to
information and services

DISABILITY DOESN'T DISCRIMINATE

BUT THE GOVERNMENT DOES

How is this even possible in 2021?



If you didn't know this shameful fact already, prepare to be shocked.

If you become disabled after you've turned 65, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) – meant to be your safety net – doesn't actually cover you.

We've witnessed jaws drop to the floor when we share this appalling truth, and many people still can't believe it's true. So how is it even possible?

It harks back to 2013, when the Federal Government deliberately amended the Age Discrimination Act, allowing the NDIS to legally exclude people over the age of 65, who acquire a disability. Also excluded are people who were over 65 and living with a disability when the NDIS was rolled out.

In Australia, more than 4.4 million people – that's one in five – live with a disability. And almost half (44.5%) of these are over the age of 65. Right now, people over 65 who acquire a disability are funded through the My Aged Care Scheme, not the NDIS. This means a person with a spinal cord injury receives \$52,000 a year instead of \$165,600.

It's blatant discrimination that could impact anyone you love, and it's unthinkable that it's still happening in 2021.

That's why, on 21 June 2021, Spinal Life embarked on a nationwide advocacy campaign; the first of its kind to be carried out by a not-for-profit in Australia.

The campaign calls on everyday people to go online and sign a petition that would send an email to their federal politicians, demanding change.

The message of our campaign: "Disability Doesn't Discriminate – But the Government does" has been seen and heard by more than 12.8 million Australians. It made

headlines across all major TV channels, radio stations and newspapers. Plus we had 24 organisations, businesses and not-for-profits have joined us on the campaign, and webinars have been held throughout the campaign.

All of this helped us to generate more than 20,000 petition signatures, with every one generating an email to their federal politician. Every state politician, federal politician and senator in Australia has now been contacted about the campaign, and lobbying meetings have been held across the country.

So, where to next?

Starting out more than 60 years ago, Spinal Life has always been an advocate for a fairer and more equitable society. As such, this was a situation we simply couldn't ignore.

As an organisation, we're committed to ending age discrimination.

The support we've had from our members, the general public and other organisations has been massive, and we've received hundreds of stories from people sharing the impact of this clear example of age discrimination. For sharing your stories and all of your support, we thank you.

We will continue to work with the media to highlight the issue, while lobbying the government, sharing with them your real-life stories and calling for change.

We'll be holding webinars to let our campaign supporters know when progress is made or any updates are available. And if you haven't already signed the petition, please visit the Disability Doesn't Discriminate website – you'll be adding your voice to call for change! [A](#)

For more information and to sign the petition, go to disabilitydoesntdiscriminate.com.au



3 QUESTIONS WITH THE CHAIR

Gyl Stacey

What's been happening with the Board since the last issue of The Advocate?

It's been a busy few months which has seen us focus further on improving our systems, refreshing our websites and online presence, as well as planning for our AGM which this year will be held as a hybrid meeting. With the ongoing uncertainty around COVID-19, we thought it was important to provide both online and on site options to encourage as many members as possible to participate. More information on the AGM will be sent out to you during October and will also be available on the Spinal Life website.

There's been a lot of media coverage about Disability Doesn't Discriminate. Why did Spinal Life run this campaign?

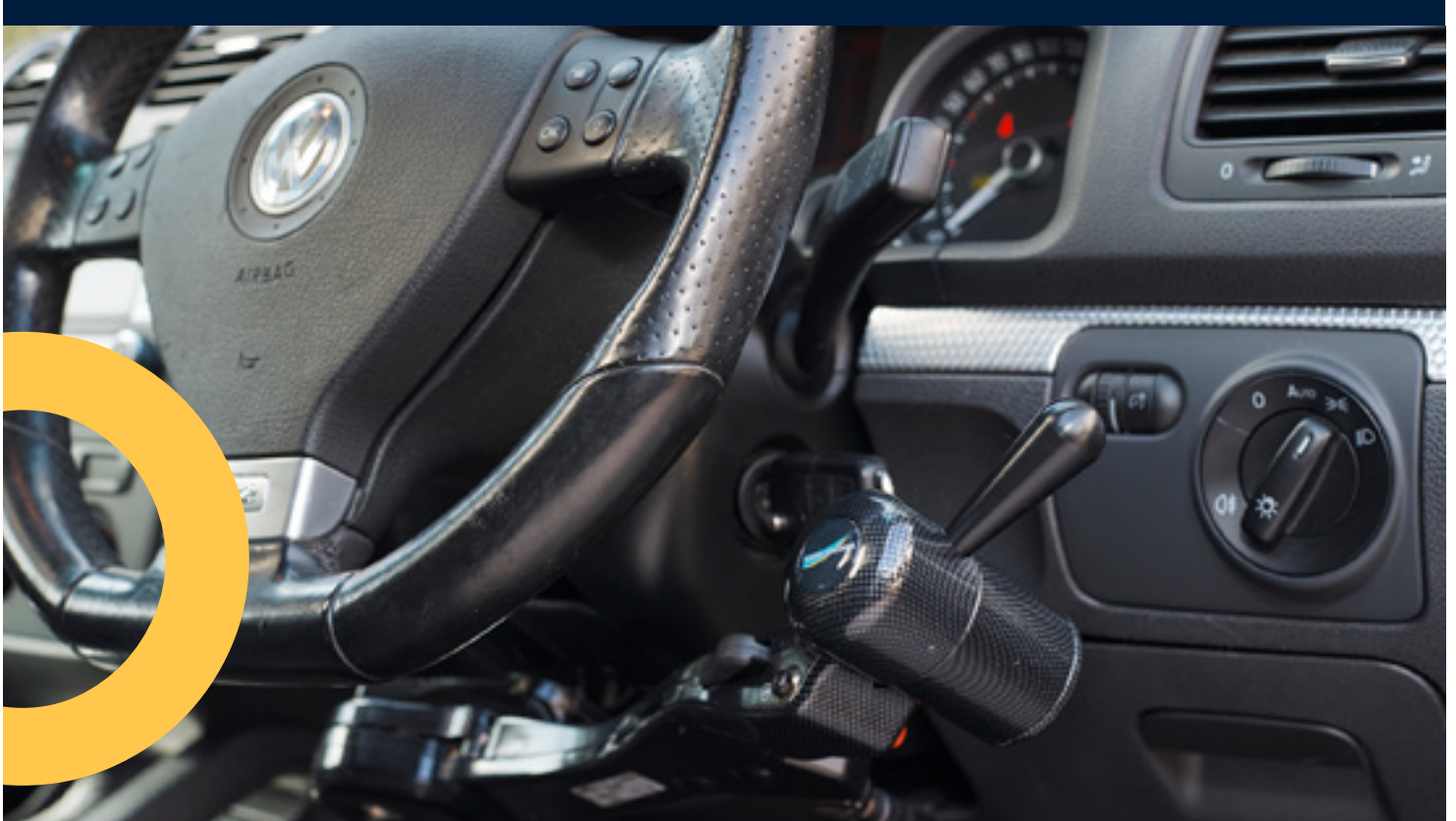
We ran this campaign to highlight the discrepancy in funding provided to our over-65 members who are not eligible for NDIS but receive lesser funding through the aged care system. The age discrimination issue was key to our campaign which was broadcast throughout the media and has generated over 20,000 signatures. We have also been active in bringing the matter to some of the most senior levels in government to put pressure on them to support this important issue.

What's next?

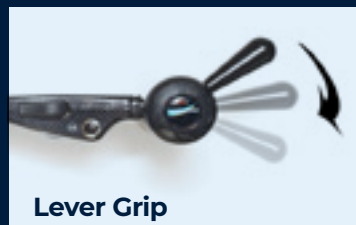
There's a few important issues on the horizon. We will of course be continuing to focus on the Disability Doesn't Discriminate campaign, lobbying Federal Government for change. We are also involved in making transport in South East Queensland more accessible, ahead of the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2032. Finally, work is well underway on the build of the new Fitness and Rehabilitation Centre at Woolloongabba which will be open in early 2022.

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A P.S for people with PPS

Spinal Life Registered Nurse, Deb Dent shares her tips on managing the symptoms of post-polio syndrome

It's World Polio Day on October 24 – a day that commemorates the birth of the man who developed the polio vaccine, Jonas Salk, and highlights global efforts to eradicate the disease.

These days, thanks to the vaccine, polio remains endemic in just two countries: Afghanistan and Pakistan. But it's a very different story when it comes to post-polio syndrome (PPS).

While polio is an infectious viral disease that affects a person's nervous system and can strike at any age, PPS is a non-contagious condition that can affect anyone who's previously had polio. The physical symptoms usually emerge later in life – anywhere from 15 to 40 years after contracting the initial polio infection.

The main symptom of PPS is new muscle weakness that gets worse over time. Things like muscle and joint pain, muscle wasting and muscle spasms/twitching can also be factors, and severe fatigue is very common.

While there's currently no cure for PPS, the right treatment can help you manage your symptoms and improve your quality of life, keeping you as comfortable and independent as possible.

TIPS AND TREATMENT

Conserve your energy

When it comes to physical activity, pace yourself and rest frequently.

Don't overdo it

Limit anything that causes you pain or fatigue. Even if you're having a good day, moderation is key to avoiding subsequent bad days.

Use assistive devices

Things like canes, walkers, wheelchairs, motor scooters, shower grab bars and raised loo seats can really help you conserve your energy.

Work out, but work smart

Exercising to maintain fitness and muscle strength is important, but never do it to the point of pain or fatigue. Things like swimming and water aerobics are often recommended, perhaps every other day and always at a relaxed pace.

Embrace therapy

Good therapists can help with all sorts of things, from breathing methods to help you conserve energy, to voice strengthening exercises and ways to compensate if you have swallowing difficulties.

Protect your lungs

If you have impaired breathing, always be on the lookout for signs you might be getting a respiratory infection, and then seek treatment immediately. Don't smoke (obviously), and stay up-to-date with all your flu and pneumonia shots.

Avoid fall

Always wear good shoes, avoid slippery surfaces and make sure your floors are clear of any clutter. It might also be a good idea to get rid of any rugs.

Stay warm

Muscles are forced to work much harder when it's cold, increasing muscle fatigue. Be sure to keep your home at a comfortable temperature and rug up when you're heading out – the key is to dress in layers.

Sleep well

Post-polio syndrome can sometimes cause sleep apnoea – if you're affected, avoid sleeping on your back, and perhaps consider using a device that helps open your airway while you sleep. **A**

Visit spinal.com.au for more information and health tips.

When it's good to be Cross

**Ready to make your business more accessible?
Meet our access & inclusion expert, Dane Cross**

If you're a business looking to improve your accessibility and inclusion, there's only one man to call: Dane Cross.

As a person with disability himself, Dane's 20+ years of lived experience, as well as his qualifications as an Access Consultant, have given him a unique insight into what it means to provide "Good Access" – and how improving this can also improve business.

We spoke to Dane just six weeks into his new job at Spinal Life Australia, to find out a bit more about him and his exciting new role:

Tell us...

... About you

In August 2001, when I was 21 years old, I sustained a spinal cord injury (C5 quadriplegia, complete) playing touch football. Prior to that, I was highly active and loved sport and the outdoors: I was studying Exercise Science at university, working as an indoor rock-climbing instructor and had just been named in the Queensland touch football team. Needless to say, my injury was "life changing". Importantly though, it was not "life ending". I've always had a positive approach, and post-injury it's helped me to live out my dreams and lead a fulfilling and meaningful life.

... About your biggest passions

Travel and my family (but not in that order!). I met my wife, Stacey at work in 2007. We started dating in 2010 and got married in 2014. Two years earlier we underwent our first cycle of IVF and, after five failed attempts (including one miscarriage), our eldest son was conceived. Three years later, we were back in the IVF clinic, and after an even longer and more emotionally and physically taxing process, our second son was conceived. I play a very active role as a parent and as parents, Stacey and I are conscious of not letting my disability have a negative impact on our sons' lives. We make every effort to ensure they're provided the same opportunities that we were as children. This has led to many "Cross Family Adventures" that we've been sharing on our Instagram and YouTube channels (@Cross_Family_



Adventures) in an effort to help breakdown stereotypes of what it means to be a family affected by disability.

... About your career

Not long after my injury, I returned to university and completed my bachelor's degree in Exercise Science. Later, I took on a role with PCYC Queensland and was employed there for 17 years. During this time I also completed studies in Access Consulting. After years of encountering endless access barriers, poor customer service and limited access to goods and services, I decided to channel those feelings of exclusion and resentment into something positive! I also became a member of the Association of Consultants in Access Australia, and started my own small business, Inclusive Access Solutions, providing assessment and advice to businesses relating to access for people with disability.

... About your new job at Spinal Life Australia

I've just started a new full-time position as Senior Advisor – Access, Advocacy & Grants, which combines my personal passion with my professional skills and qualifications. Consulting on access and inclusion takes up the majority of my time. Basically, we help organisations improve access to their facilities and services for people with disability. It's all about providing inclusive outcomes that are functional for the entire community and lead to better social and economic outcomes. Spinal Life actually offered this type of service a few years ago, but at that time it just didn't take. Recently, however, there's been a bit of a change and real emphasis is now being placed on having an inclusive society. In Queensland, especially with the Paralympics coming to Brisbane in 2032, there's been a real shift towards becoming more accessible and inclusive. So the demand for a service such as this has increased. It's a huge validation for what has been years of advocacy.

... About a normal day at work for you

It can vary from day to day – my role is as multifaceted as it is exciting! At the moment we're working on a few great projects, including a contract with a government authority, which looks after dams and water catchments in southern Queensland. Over the next two years we'll be

visiting the recreation sites, campgrounds and trails at each of the dams, assessing them for accessibility, and making recommendations for improved access and inclusion. As well as site audits like this, I also conduct desktop audits on plans for anything from large developments by regional councils, to small office renovations by local businesses. In the advocacy space, we're working on an accessible beaches project, and we're still continuing our campaign to promote accessible tourism within the tourism industry. Then of course, as a charitable, not-for-profit organisation, grant funding is vital to Spinal Life Australia, so I'm constantly monitoring funding opportunities.

... Why accessibility is so important to businesses

In Australia, the law says that customers with disabilities should be able to access your building, goods or services just like any other customer. If not, they could make a complaint of discrimination under either State anti-discrimination laws, or the Federal Disability Discrimination Act 1992. The cost of such a complaint could be as damaging to your reputation as to your finances. But beside the fact that it's unlawful and immoral in Australia to *not* provide "Good Access," it actually just makes genuine, good business sense. We know that approximately one in five people in Australia have a disability. This increases to 35% when you include people with temporary disabilities due to injury or illness. We also know that people with disability are accessing the community in ways and frequency that we haven't seen before. This is due to the advancements in assistive technology (e.g. powered wheelchairs), as well as the additional support provided through the NDIS. The NDIS is helping to fuel the Australian economy. It's essentially a \$22 billion opportunity to businesses, as the money going into the NDIS flows into our communities.

... How businesses can benefit from working with you


As a qualified Access Consultant, I help businesses to navigate the complexities of providing "Good Access," ensuring that any changes to their practice or facility are done according to the regulations. For most businesses, the big question is: "Where do I start?" That's where I come in. My approach isn't to "wave a big stick" or to threaten

anyone with a Human Rights complaint. While there are certain legal requirements that we must meet under certain circumstances, I'm of the opinion that *some* access is better than none at all. So if your business is currently inaccessible, let's just start by enabling people to get into your front door, and then we'll go from there, developing a plan that you can implement over time and as budget allows. Building that access and inclusion will also ensure you build customer satisfaction and that all-important revenue.

... The worst thing about your job

I guess it's the odd occasion when I come across individuals or organisations who just aren't willing to open their eyes to the benefits of inclusion, and therefore undertake the necessary steps to become more accessible or inclusive. It can be tough trying to change someone's mindset or stigma that they may have ingrained into their minds for whatever reason.

... The best thing about your job

People with disability often experience social exclusion due to barriers: actual physical barriers, such as stairs at the door of a premises, as well as people's attitudes. Being and feeling isolated or excluded can have profound impacts on a person's self-worth and self-esteem, and in Australia, disability and social isolation/exclusion too commonly go hand in hand. If unaddressed, it can make medical conditions worse and cause long-term mental and physical health problems. It's important for society to understand that people with disability don't *want* to be segregated or isolated. They want to be included, appreciated, and live fulfilling and meaningful lives contributing to their local community. A more socially inclusive Australia raises everyone's standard of living, enriching our lives economically as well as socially and culturally. Therefore, as an Access and Inclusion Consultant, the best part of my job is helping to break down these barriers, overcome exclusion, and enable people with disability full access and inclusion in their community. 

To learn more about Spinal Life's access and inclusion services, go to: spinal.com.au



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Back in the saddle again

How a young farmhand got a (literal) raise, and got back to work



When Sam O'Connor got into a hot seat – on the back of a bull – on New Year's Day 2018, it changed his life. In July 2021, he got into a different type of hot seat, and it again changed his life.

Back in 2018, Sam was a rising star in the professional bull-riding community. Unstoppable. He was 25 years old at the time, and travelling internationally to compete in places like Canada, the USA and Brazil – but it was a rodeo in Rockhampton that cut his career short. He came off badly, and sustained a complete T11 spinal cord injury.

When he wasn't conquering bulls across the globe, Sam had worked as a farmhand on Collingvale Station, a cattle property in Dingo Beach, just north of Airlie Beach in Queensland. "God's own country," he calls it. After his accident, Sam was determined to be able to get back to some sort of work on the property. Luckily, during the six months he spent in the Spinal Injuries Unit at the Princess Alexandra Hospital after his accident, he met Tania Goossen from Spinal Life Australia's Back2Work Project.

"When I got hurt, I thought I was in for a world of headaches, but then Tania walked in and said: 'If you want to go back to work, I'm here to help,'" he recalls.

Tania and Sam talked to Pauline and Marvin, the owners of Collingvale Station, who were prepared to do just about anything to retain their highly valued worker. Together, they identified some duties that Sam could do once he got home, like spraying weeds and checking dams and fences across the property, but this was going to be impossible for Sam to do from his wheelchair. So Tania helped Sam apply for funding for work-related equipment through JobAccess, and they approved an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) modified with hand controls. It worked brilliantly, and Sam was back at work again.



“I taught myself to use a drone, and I’d go mustering in the ATV and use the drone to help find cattle,” he says.

However, Sam really wanted to get back to bigger things. He had his eye on his tractor, and knew that if he could just get up into it by himself, he’d be able to put in full days on the property: unstoppable again.

Tania had recently worked with Ross Case from Mobility Modification Services in Townsville, to assist another cane farmer return to active farm duties using a Life Essentials hoist. These hoists, which cost well over \$120,000, were previously only available in the USA, and Ross had to do a lot of work to get the first one in Australia. Tania didn’t know if he’d consider a second one for Sam... but it was worth a try.

As for Sam, he didn’t even know such a thing existed until he spoke to Tania. “She’s just such an ideas person, and she organised everything,” he raves.

So JobAccess sent an independent assessor out to Collingvale Station to meet with Sam, Pauline, Marvin and Tania. And after considering all the options, they decided that the Life Essentials hoist met all their criteria, and was worth the investment in Sam’s employment future. Ross accepted the challenge, and eight months later, in early July 2021, the Life Essentials hoist was installed into the back of Collingvale Station’s newest Isuzu D-Max.

The hoist has meant Sam can not only transfer from the driver’s seat of his ute to the tractor, but he can also open and close farm gates, check the tow couplings, secure loads, fix

fences, diagnose issues with machinery so he can call Pauline or Marvin to bring out the right part, check in the engine bay if something isn’t working... and even polish the back window of his tractor. He was literally using the hoist to build himself a carport when we spoke to him for this interview. The best part is, he can do it all by himself.

Sam is ecstatic. He’s back clearing paddocks and driving his tractor, out on the land he loves, and putting in a full day’s work. He’s also been doing neurophysics therapy and can now stand up with calipers. Marvin and Pauline couldn’t be happier either: their best bloke is back in the hot seat, doing his job with a big cheeky grin, and giving everyone a hard time.

“The hoist has been a total game changer for me, I can do absolutely anything now,” says Sam. “I never used to ask for help to get a job done and now I’ve got total independence again. I can do so much and I’m just making the most of it. Give me a couple more months and maybe the novelty of work will wear off. Surely it has to – no man can like working as much as I do! But having it taken away from you makes you appreciate it so much more. Between Tania and my physio Ken Ware, they’ve pretty much given me back my life – the life I was told that I’d never have again. There are no boundaries now, only the ones I put on myself – and there aren’t many of those!”

Unstoppable. [A](#)

For more information, visit spinal.com.au/back2work, mobilitymodificationservices.com.au and jobaccess.gov.au

The latest

Information, inspiration and inclusivity



Photo by Lucas Favre on Unsplash

RUN. FOR THOSE WHO DREAM TO WALK

If you've never heard of Mark Pollock, we suggest you Google him immediately: his story is quite extraordinary. In 1998, aged 22, he became blind. But that didn't stop him from becoming an adventure athlete, competing in ultra-endurance races and being the first blind person to race to the South Pole. Oh yes, and in his spare time he also won silver and bronze medals for rowing at the Commonwealth Games and set up a motivational speaking business.

Fast forward to 2010, and Mark almost died after falling from a second-story window. He broke his back and the damage to his spinal cord left him paralysed.

Incredibly, that still didn't stop him, and these days Mark is not only known as an explorer and international motivational speaker, but also an author and subject of two acclaimed documentaries, *Blind Man Walking* and *Unbreakable – The Mark Pollock Story*. He's also been selected by the World Economic Forum as a Young Global Leader and awarded honorary doctorates by The Royal

College of Surgeons in Ireland and from Queens University Belfast. He's a UBS Global Visionary, is on the Board of the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation (USA), is a Wings for Life Ambassador (Europe) and is a former member of the Global Futures Council on Human Enhancement.

In short, he's pretty amazing.

He's also the face of an event called Run in the Dark. With the tagline: "Run. For those who dream to walk," it brings together thousands of people who run 5k or 10k in order to fundraise for Collaborative Cures, whose mission is to help cure paralysis in our lifetime. Over the past 10 years some 120,000+ runners have taken part in Run in the Dark, in 72 locations across the globe. This year's event takes place on 17 November at 8pm local time. It's planned as a virtual event for obvious reasons, so participants can choose their own route. [A](#)

To find out more, go to: runinthedark.org

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HANDLE WITH CARE

National Carers Week runs from 10 to 16 October this year, and we just wanted to raise a glass and celebrate the extraordinary contribution these people make to our nation.

There are currently 2.65 million Australians who provide unpaid care and support to a family member or friend. Some are helping people with a disability or mental health condition, some are assisting those with a chronic condition or terminal illness, while others are caring for frail aged people or people with an alcohol or other drug issue. Regardless, they make an unimaginable contribution to not only our communities, but also to the national economy. Last year alone, for example, it's estimated that unpaid carers provided 2.2 *billion* hours of unpaid care – that's more than 42 million hours every week.

National Carers Week is now in its 29th year, and with COVID-19 adding even more pressures and responsibilities to carers' roles, it's never been more important. This year's theme is "Millions of Reasons to Care," which recognises the millions of carers around the country who provide such incredible care and support to their loved ones. We see you, we salute you, and we thank you.

For more information go to: carersweek.com.au

NEW FARM PARK(ING)

If you live in Brisbane you're no doubt aware of the beautiful oasis that is New Farm Park. Created in 1914, the Heritage-listed park covers around 15 hectares of land in a fantastic location, just four kilometres from the city centre and right on the Brisbane River. It also adjoins the Brisbane Powerhouse arts precinct, which is home to incredible performances, restaurants and the Jan Powers Farmers Markets Powerhouse, held from 6am to 12 noon every Saturday.

The park is currently undergoing an upgrade to improve accessibility and safety, and one of the many things being addressed – along with things like new pedestrian crossing points and improved paths – is car parking spaces. New angled car parks are being introduced to the park, and the good news is that they're also including two new accessible disability parking bays.

While work is not scheduled to be completed until December 2021, you'll still be able to visit New Farm Park while the upgrade is being carried out. Which means you can still enjoy the incredible jacaranda season – the magnificent trees usually blossom around October.

To find out more, go to: brisbane.qld.gov.au

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STRICTLY (WHEELCHAIR) BALLROOM

Jane Hutch tells us about her journey to becoming a wheelchair ballroom dancer

Back in 2009 I was working in a recreation centre and training as a life guard in Australind, near Bunbury in Western Australia. After living there for 12 years with my husband and our four children, I was planning to move back to Perth after my marriage split up. But then I sustained a spinal cord injury in an accident, which threw a bit of a spanner in the works. I had to take a different direction in life.

I moved back to Perth, and these days I'm living independently on my own and working at the Paraplegic Benefit Fund. I also do peer support at Fiona Stanley Hospital, and I'm a Peer Support Officer for Spinal Life Australia.

My biggest passion, however, is ballroom dancing.

About five years ago I was selected for the Abilympics – they're like work-skill Olympics for people with disabilities – for the photography section. I got to go to Europe and made some fantastic friends during the trip. Some time later, one of them posted on Facebook that she had started wheelchair ballroom dancing, and I was like, "Oooh, I think I might like to give that a go!"

So I dragged one of my wheelie girlfriends with me to try para-dancing one Saturday. I'd never done ballroom dancing as an able-bodied person, and I thought that I'd either really hate it or really love it. Happily it was the latter, and we were both hooked from the very first go.

That was in late 2018, and I found myself going from zero wheelchair dancing experience to competing in the national wheelchair ballroom dancing championships in Melbourne that same year. Unfortunately I then had to have some time off because I broke my leg – and then I broke it again! That's what happens when you're really bad at transferring. I couldn't wait to get back to it: it's hard cheering from the sidelines when you just want to be on the dance floor.

We do all of the dances that fall into the "standard" category of able-bodied ballroom dancing, including the waltz, tango, foxtrot, Viennese waltz and the quickstep, plus Latin dances like the samba, rumba and cha-cha-cha.

Currently we dance in wheelchairs with able-bodied partners, but in the overseas competition there's also a category for two people in wheelchairs partnering each other. We just need to get more people on board! There's even a solo dance category.

Jane and her new partner, Ian Powell, competing at the Night of Stars competition in Perth



I've just teamed up with a new able-bodied partner. Ian hadn't danced in ages, but came on board when the principal at my dance school, Darryl at Ballroom Fit, asked if he'd like to start again. It's been a real experience for Ian, who's never done anything like this before, and we're both learning as we go along.

I just love para-dancing and it's so good for you, physically. Before my accident I was always really fit and enjoyed swimming, walking and going to the gym, but afterwards I wasn't doing anything. Dancing filled a huge void for me. And because there are quite a few competitions throughout the year it also holds me accountable, to be healthy and the best that I can be.

But wheelchair ballroom dancing is also good for your mental state of mind. Not only do you get to have creative input into your routines, you also have to remember them!

If you're thinking about trying para-dancing, don't let the idea of competitions scare you off. If you just want to have some fun, you should definitely give it a go. You'll come away feeling like you're on a high. I can have a really "blah" kind of day, but if I go to a dance class all of the endorphins kick in and I always leave buzzing.

I really struggle to understand why more people just don't get out there and give it a try – it's just amazing!

And the exciting news is that it looks like wheelchair ballroom dancing is going to be making its debut at the Los Angeles 2028 Games. Whatever happens, it should definitely be part of the competition by Brisbane in 2032. I'll be too long in the tooth by then, but it will be great for other dance lovers! **A**

Jane dances at Ballroom Fit in Perth ballroomfit.com.au, but there are para-dancing schools all around Australia

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