

THE Advocate

A VOICE FOR ACCESSIBLE, EQUITABLE AND EMPOWERED LIVES | 2022 WINTER ISSUE

THE ADVENTURE ISSUE

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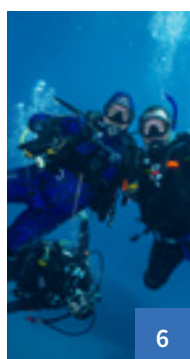
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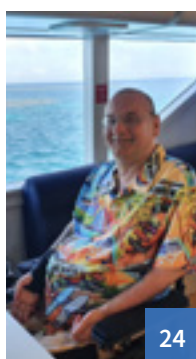
IN THIS ISSUE

4 QUESTIONS WITH THE CEO	4
PROFILE	6
PEER SUPPORT	12
HEALTHY LIVING CENTRE	23
HEALTH	26
ADVOCACY	30
ADVENTURE TIPS	31
STAFF PROFILE	32
NEWS	33
THE LAST WORD	34

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6



24



33

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Adventure awaits

Over the years, I've done many adventurous things – learning to fly a plane in California, skiing and paragliding in the south of France, scuba diving in the Red Sea, learning to sail in a tall ship from Scotland to Ireland and more. I've always taken up the opportunity for anything adventurous that pushes my own personal boundaries and sometimes takes me out of my comfort zone. But these are the things I look back on and think 'I'm really glad I gave it a go.'

I'm sure that's a sentiment shared by many of you and our members, as we often hear tales of your adventurous exploits. So we thought it fitting to dedicate this issue of *The Advocate* to some of these fantastic stories.

You can also read some winter health tips from our resident nursing team, along with an update on our ongoing advocacy work, what's happening at the Healthy Living Centre's and more.

As we look to the future, the Board has identified how important it is that every part of Spinal Life thinks about the sustainability of the organisation, and how we impact the economy, environment and society.

We've recently started the journey towards sustainability and will soon be commencing with a new initiative, aiming at reducing our impacts. You can learn more about this on page 33.

Recently, I toured North Queensland and had the pleasure of meeting with staff, members and customers. It was a great opportunity to share some of the exciting things happening at Spinal Life and to hear feedback and ideas to help shape the organisation in years to come.

In Townsville, I was pleased to be present to thank and farewell retiring volunteers Syd and Eric Collins. Since 1995, they've worked tirelessly to support polio survivors and their loved ones, connecting people and providing education about polio and its effects.

Another one of our long-serving volunteers, Bill Peacock OAM has been announced as a finalist for the *Queensland Lifetime Contribution to Volunteering Award*. Bill has relentlessly campaigned to raise the awareness of Australia's community of polio survivors and their needs, and has fundraised, advocated, and provided support to people living with a disability for many years.

Finally, I would like to recognise a retiring Pat Allison who has worked hard to organise peer support catch ups and provide support in Bundaberg for the past 19 years. We are very fortunate to have such a dedicated team of volunteers who support the organisation. To each and every one of you who dedicates their time and plays a role in supporting Spinal Life to be all that we can be, we say an enormous *thank you*.

Remember, you can always contact me directly at chair@spinal.com.au if you'd like to get in touch.

GYL STACEY

DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?



Email us at theadvocate@spinal.com.au – we'd love to hear from you!

4 QUESTIONS WITH THE CEO

Mark Townend



What are Spinal Life's plans for accessible tourism?

We continue to advocate for more accessible tourism opportunities and have recently written to the Queensland Government, requesting to make 2023 the 'year of accessible tourism'. As part of the proposal, we've asked the Government to commit \$18 million to support tourism operators to become more accessible and inclusive. Keep an eye out as we continue to work towards this important goal. If you'd like to help with this concept, please contact your local member of state parliament to share your thoughts and ask for their support.

Where are you at with other advocacy work?

The federal election has been and gone, and although many of us may be fed up with campaigning in recent months, it's important that Spinal Life continues to represent the interests of our members and the wider community on key advocacy issues. We commenced the *Disability Doesn't Discriminate* campaign in June 2021, aiming to influence the federal government to end age discrimination against people with disability by enabling people over 65 to be eligible for the NDIS. At the end of the campaign – our first effort at coordinating a national campaign – we had amassed 25,000 signatures and secured significant levels of media coverage over many months. Despite these efforts, we have not yet been successful in our campaign, but will continue to advocate for this and other changes at the national level. Please stay in touch for opportunities to assist us with this and similar campaigns.

What are you most excited about right now?

Definitely the launch of the Healthy Living Centre Brisbane. We recently hosted an Open Day on Saturday 28 May. It was fantastic to see some of our regular customers attend, alongside some new faces who we hope will visit again in the future. It's a very exciting time, and the demand for services has exceeded all our expectations. Since opening, we have welcomed a second Exercise Physiologist, a fourth

Community Nurse and an Assistive Technology Mentor! I'm so pleased to see that the Centre is proving popular with such a wide audience and can't wait to see what comes next.

Who do we need to honour in this issue?

I would like to acknowledge the sad passing of two contributors to our success at Spinal Life Australia: Scott Stidston and Wendy Lovelace. Scott and Wendy were former team members who made such an impact and will be missed. Scott was a tireless advocate and campaigner for better access in the community for people with disability. Turning his disability into a driving force for good – for community change – was a skill that Scott had without limit. Over the years, Scott shared his life experiences with thousands of school students as a valued presenter for Spinal Life's SEAT program, encouraging them to stay safe, and we know his legacy will live on in the lives of the children he has helped protect. We also farewelled Wendy Lovelace, who has left an indelible mark with her efforts to improve access and inclusion in the community. With decades of experience as an architect and accessibility consultant, Wendy was always ready to assist anyone struggling or trying to find a solution, including many businesses and community services such as transport to ensure they were more inclusive for everyone. Wendy fought a good fight for people with disability and like many, we will miss her dearly. [A](#)



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Seas the day

**How Jason East got back to scuba diving...
and came home to the ocean**



Jason East, left, says he was born to be in the water
Photo: Libby Sterling Photography (sterlingimagery.au)

When Jason East managed to go scuba diving again after a life-changing car accident, it was a real homecoming. Some people, after all, are just born to be in the water.

“I was born in Brisbane, and went straight from the hospital onto a boat, says Jason, now 45. “It was my home for the next 14 years.”

“ I love the sea more than the land. When you've been around it for so long, it just becomes a part of you. ”

“I lived on the boat with my Dad, Mum and sister. Our address was the ocean and we could go for weeks without seeing another human being – or even a speck of land,” he says.

When necessary, the family would pull into different ports so that Jason's dad could get enough work to pay for fuel and food... and then they'd be off again. “Mum homeschooled us, and snorkelling or beachcombing was our reward at the end of every day. Even today, I love the sea more than the land. When you've been around it for so long, it just becomes part of you.”

They became land-based when Jason was 14, ending up on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait and finally moving into a house. For someone who'd never lived on land before, things like a flushing toilet and a proper shower were the height of luxury!

"I went to school on the island, but over the years my parents owned a variety of businesses, and if a staff member didn't turn up, I skipped school and went to work," he recalls. After stints in shops, a fibreglass factory and driving a dinghy, he left school to do a three-year apprenticeship as a baker.

Jason's parents – who'd had two more children since becoming land-based – ultimately separated and went their own ways. His mum moved to Cairns with his two youngest siblings, while his dad headed to New Zealand. Jason, however, stayed on Thursday Island and took on an even greater variety of jobs. "When you're on an island, you have to be flexible and multitask," he explains. "I was a cleaner; I drove just about every type of machine there is; I worked on building sites doing everything from plumbing to roofing to cementing; and I worked in bottle shops, kitchens and pubs."

And in between all of these, he was also a commercial crayfish diver and fisherman.

"Even when I had a full-time job, I'd still be out diving for crayfish on the weekends or whenever I had a week off. It was work, but I didn't look at it as work. Being in and on the water is my passion, so I did it more as a way to relax," he says.

Jason's first accident happened when he was 32. By that stage he was living on another island in the Strait, Horn Island, and at work one night, pouring concrete, he was hit in the back by a bobcat bucket. The damage was severe.

"It took me a year to get back up on my feet again," says Jason, who was unable to walk more than two or three metres at a time. "I was in a lot of pain and even after a year I still wasn't 100% right. Eventually I could work, however, and I ended up being second in charge at a shipping yard."

It was then that things got *really* bad.

"After work one night I had a couple of drinks before heading home. I then had a shower, took my medication for my back pain and was ready to go to sleep when some friends came around and wanted to go to a party."

Jason dropped them off... but he didn't make it back: "I fell asleep at the wheel and rolled my car."

The paramedics took him from Horn Island to Thursday Island in a rescue chopper, and then the Royal Flying Doctor Service flew him to Townsville. From there, he went to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane, where the eventual diagnosis was C4 quadriplegia. "So, basically, I broke my neck. Nothing else: just my neck."

Jason moved from the ICU to the Spinal Injuries Unit, ultimately spending almost a year in the PA Hospital before returning to Cairns.

He was only planning to stop there on his way back to the islands, but ended up staying on in Cairns, where he lives to this day. "It seemed like a wise decision as there wasn't much disability accommodation on the islands back then," he says. "I went through a really rough patch at first and suffered depression for a few years – I just didn't know how to handle things. Then my Dad got diagnosed with cancer, so I spent some time with him in New Zealand before he passed. A year later, Mum also got diagnosed with cancer and died in 2016."

His girlfriend at the time also became ill and, rather than putting Jason through any more stress as she dealt with her illness, went back overseas to live with her parents. ➤

Jason with diving instructor Richard Stevens



Jason never feels more at home than when he's on or in the ocean



Webbed gloves help Jason move through the water



Photo: Libby Sterling Photography (sterlingimagery.au)

Despite such tragedies, Jason was able to turn things around by living life according to his motto: Don't stop your therapy, have a positive attitude, and just take every day as it comes.

During his time in hospital, he'd been told by numerous medical experts that he'd never move again. "But I was determined to prove them wrong," he says. "My attitude is, if you don't move it you're gonna lose it... so I just kept moving. I haven't stopped my therapy from the day I left. Things didn't happen straight away and it's taken me so long to get where I am now, but from having no movement from my neck down, it's incredible what I can do now."

One such thing is his beloved scuba diving.

"Everyone's amazed that I'm actually able to do it, because breathing is so important in scuba diving, and if you have a high-level injury your diaphragm gets weak and your breathing pretty much goes out the window," he explains. "But I did a lot of pool work, and over time managed to strengthen my lungs."

The next step was to pass his medical and start working with a diving instructor. "I actually had *three* instructors in the water with me at my first session, just to make sure I was okay," he says. "They needn't have worried – as soon as I put the regulator in my mouth and my head underwater, I was grinning from ear to ear. When my instructor asked me how I was, my answer was: 'I'm fine – I'm *home*!'"

After only his second session in the pool, Jason's instructor said he was ready for the real thing. But then COVID struck, and he had to wait until April last year for the big moment.

"Going out on the boat from Port Douglas to the reef, I got emotional," he reflects. "To go diving again was one of the long-term goals I'd set during my time in the Spinal Injuries Unit, and I couldn't believe it was actually happening."

When Jason finally got in the ocean, he was *really* home...

"It's a different world under the water – everything is peaceful and it makes me feel calm. It's the one place I'm always happy to be," he says.

The biggest highlight for Jason on that first dive was when his instructor pointed out a shark – and Jason chased after it. "When we got back up to the surface, they were like, 'hey – people normally swim *away* from sharks!' But I hadn't seen one in ages and really missed them. It was like an old friend had come to say hello – and I just wanted to say hello back."

While most people use their legs when they go scuba diving, Jason's spinal cord injury means he needs to use webbed gloves to help pull him through the water.

"Once I was in the water, apart from those gloves, my instructors said they couldn't really tell any difference between me and other divers," he says. "That's what I love about diving: you leave your disability on land and you're just like everybody else."

Jason's been diving on one other occasion since then, but in an ideal world he'd dearly love to be out in the water at least once a week. And thanks to one of his instructors, Richard Stevens, it looks like that dream is about to become a reality.

Richard's vision is for his dive company, Marlin Coast Diving, to be the "centre of excellence for accessible diving". The company offers scuba diving for *every* body, and a range of certification courses based around DDI (Disabled Divers International) protocols.

"As part of his vision, Richard wants me to assist other people with disabilities who want to go diving," says Jason. "As he says, people can talk about breathing and technique for divers with a disability, but it's just not the same as talking to someone who actually has a disability. My role will be to work with these people at every stage – which is such a bonus as it means I'll get to go diving with them, too!"

Jason's new role helping people with disabilities learn to dive will tie in nicely with his existing work as a volunteer skipper with Sailability in Cairns. "When I started out as a participant a couple of years ago I couldn't even sit on the boats; I had to have pillows holding me up," he says. But as his confidence grew, so did his strength: "Now I can single-handedly sail a boat and take a passenger with a disability out with me."

Scuba diving *and* sailing for someone who loves being in and on the water so much? It looks like all of Jason's ships are coming in.

To learn more about accessible scuba diving with Marlin Coast Diving, visit marlincoastdiving.com or call Richard on 0400 324 664.

Jason's tips for scuba diving if you have an SCI

- If you've got a goal, don't give up on it – it took me over a decade to get back in the water.
- Get out of your comfort zone and give it a go!
- One of the most important things you need to do when preparing to go scuba diving is strengthening your lungs – lots of pool work, swimming and even just practicing holding your breath.
- Having good arm strength is a real benefit – or you'll need to have people with you who can help you out.
- You'll need to pass a medical – once you've done that, the next step is to find the right people to help you dive – instructors and people who will be your "buddy" on dives.
- If you want to go diving in the ocean, you'll also need to find a boat that will take you out – this is not as easy as it sounds, as many boats aren't wheelchair-accessible.
- Some boats might take you out but won't have wheelchair-accessible toilets or showers, so be prepared to use buckets and hoses if necessary!
- Choose the time and location of your dive carefully so the weather is in your favour.
- Make sure you have a hearty breakfast before you head out, as it's a big day and you'll be expending a lot of energy.
- Get lots of photos taken while you're under the water!
- Be prepared to get addicted to this amazing activity.
- Have fun!

Dive in to the Healthy Living Centre Cairns

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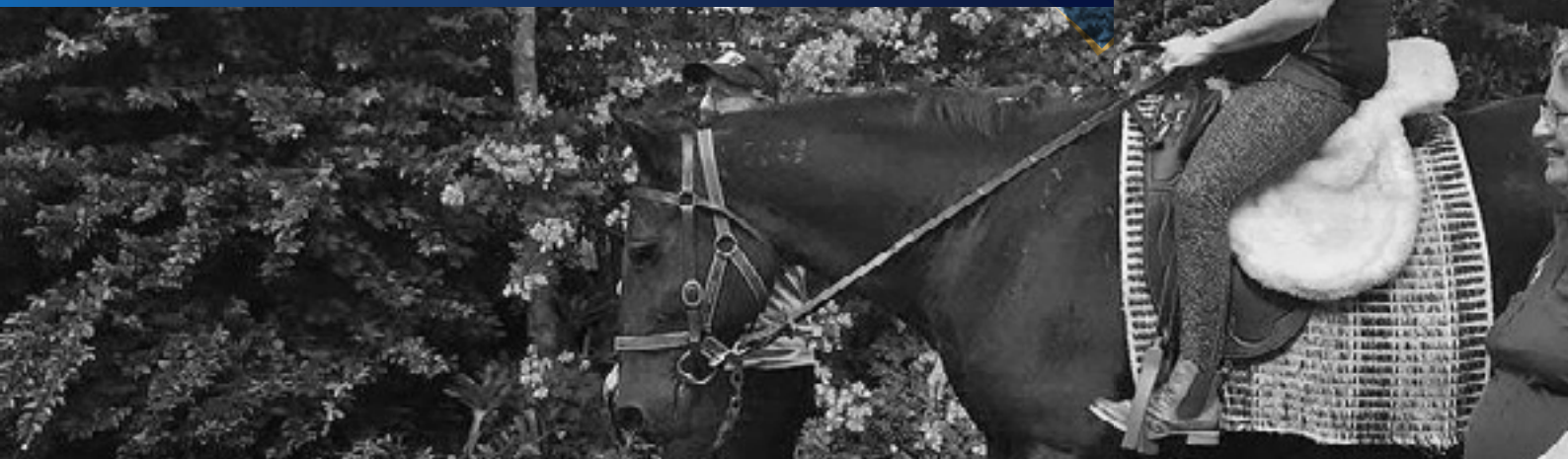
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Hey true blue

Jayne Pitman proves you can't keep a good country girl down



Jayne Pitman, 40, has always been an unashamed seeker of adventures.

"I'm a tomboy, and I just don't have much fear," she says, from the north-Brisbane suburb that she calls home these days.

But Jayne is a fair dinkum country girl at heart. Born in Longreach in central-west Queensland, she grew up in the small town of Jundah a few hours' drive away, where the population is just a smidge over 100.

"I grew up riding motorbikes, competing on horses, doing bronco branding and basically just always being outdoors," she explains.

Even her employment history sounds like a John Williamson song. Sure, the list includes cleaning motels and working in offices, but the bulk of Jayne's resume features true-blue job titles such as roo shooter, pig hunter and jillaroo.

She's also cooked for just about every roadhouse in the region, in the cafe at the iconic Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame in Longreach, and at the Middleton Hotel.

"It was built during the Cobb & Co. era and is one of the most isolated pubs in Australia – whichever direction you go, the nearest town is about 200 kilometres away," says Jayne, who for eight years not only worked in the hotel, which she co-owned with her ex-partner and his parents, but also worked on the family cattle and opal mines, *and* homeschooled her daughter.

At the age of 32, Jayne said goodbye to the pub (and her ex), and headed to Longreach to embrace a new life, and a new job working as a shearer's cook.

But, as it turned out, she had to embrace an *entirely* new life.

"It was 2015 and I was driving home to Longreach with a friend, and the tyre blew," she says. "The car rolled... and I ended up in the PA Hospital for six months, first in the Intensive Care Unit and then the Spinal Injuries Unit (SIU)."

The diagnosis was T10 complete, and the rehab was hardcore. "I really worked at it in the hospital, and after I left," says Jayne, who was determined to get back outdoors and doing the things she loves.



Which explains the list of extraordinary adventures she's enjoyed since her accident.

Even while she was still in the SIU, Jayne had a go at archery, and then spent a memorable day at a shooting range just outside of Brisbane.

When you ask Jayne how she got on, she answers in a typically low-key fashion: "Yeah, good." Press a little harder, however, and the brilliant truth comes out. "The bloke at the range was speaking to me like I'd never seen a gun before," she laughs. "But once he saw me shoot he said he thought I should take it up as a sport – and even moved the target to make it harder for me!"

As a keen horse rider before her accident, Jayne couldn't wait to get back in the saddle once she left hospital. It took her a few attempts to find just the right place, but she eventually found the perfect spot in Burpengary.

"Getting back up on a horse for the first time after my accident was scary because your legs are so important when you ride, and I can no longer feel anything from my belly button down. It was hard work to sit on a horse and to find

my balance, but I eventually got there. Being able to ride again was so special," says Jayne, who went once a week for a couple of years.

Later, for a different type of equestrian challenge, Jayne also had a crack at carriage driving. Hooked up to a horse in a special wheelchair-adapted carriage, she would steer it around using ultra-long reins. Although she admits "it wasn't quite my pace," she loved the 12 weeks she spent trying something new.

Next, Jayne took up wheelchair rugby: "I literally saw a sign that said, 'come and try' and I couldn't resist!" It led to her playing in a casual competition for more than three years.

"It was a fantastic environment – I was playing with a lot of people that I'd been with at the SIU so it was great to catch up with them all," she says. "Players from the Australian and Queensland teams would train and play with us as well," says Jayne, who was the only girl in the competition. "The boys took it pretty easy on me initially, but that changed pretty quickly. The game is as tough and violent as it looks, but I'm a country girl: that's how I like it!"

Next up on Jayne's list of outdoor activities? Water sports.

A group of lifeguards and Occupational Therapists' from the PA Hospital took Jayne and a small group down to the Gold Coast one day to go paddle boarding. And while you might think lying face-down on a paddle board on the ocean would be incredibly scary for somebody who can't walk, Jayne is typically nonchalant: "I had a life jacket on, so it was all fine. It was a wonderful sense of freedom, to move without wheels for the first time in a long while."

Her next outing on the water took place, not on the ocean, but on Lake Kurwongbah in north Brisbane. "They had a 'come and try' day for people with disability, so I went along with my sister, my niece and her friend," says Jayne.

"We went tubing, which was huge fun, but the highlight for me was definitely wake boarding. They had adaptive equipment, so you'd sit rather than stand on the board as you were pulled around the lake. I thought, 'yeah, I'll give this a go!' I'm pretty strong, and I've got good upper body strength, but it was hard! I think it took me eight attempts to get up, but I got there in the end. It was fast, and I got smashed in the water so many times... and I just loved it."

Jayne was ticking off an amazing list of outdoor activities and adventures following her car accident... but then she went to bed one night in 2019 and everything changed. ➤

“Basically, my bed just wasn't the right size and when I rolled over one night, the mattress slipped over and I fell out. I couldn't move and was on the floor for six or seven hours,” says Jayne, who was home alone at the time, and whose phone was still on the bed so she couldn't reach it to call for help.

“I'm a paraplegic, which means I have full control over my hands,” she says. “But when I fell out of bed I dislocated a disc in my neck up at C5/C6, which started to strangle my spinal cord and I started to lose the function in my hand. It was very scary.”

Like a scene out of a movie, she managed to rummage inside her bedside table and found a smartwatch – that she didn't know how to use and that only had 3% left on the battery. “I don't know technology, but I knew I had to make it work,” she says. “I just kept playing with it and finally worked out how to use it, and then dialled triple 0.”

Jayne was taken to hospital where they tried to use traction to get the disc back in, but ultimately had to do surgery to fuse the discs. “Luckily, I regained the feeling and movement in my hands,” she says.

Since then, recovery has been long and hard. “Because you lose so much muscle and condition so quickly, it's going to take me a lot to get it back. I also got struck down with skin issues, and then I ended up with osteoporosis as well. I don't do things by halves,” she says with her trademark humour.

“I have to build up my strength so I can get back to that level of fitness that will let me start doing things again,” she says. “I've started visiting Spinal Life's new Healthy Living Centre in Woolloongabba, and I'll be heading back to work out as soon as my skin issues get resolved.”

In the meantime, Jayne is still managing the odd adventure on a different set of wheels: her motorhome. “It sleeps up to 10 people, it's got a full kitchen and bathroom, and my daughter has the necessary truck licence to drive it,” she says.

Jayne also has a four-wheel drive electric chair that she can take onto the sand, so for now at least, she's swapping the country for the beach: “We just pack up the dogs, and head up the coast.” ^A

To read more member stories, visit spinal.com.au



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

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

BRISBANE: Fred Nitz on 0412 190 585.

BUNDABERG: Steve Richter on 0413 457 284.

CAIRNS: Ross Duncan on 0475 077 080.
Combined with Post Polio group.

FRASER COAST: Ross Duncan on 0475 077 080.

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.

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: Ross Duncan on 0475 077 080.

Transverse Myelitis Group

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It's never too late

From cruising through Europe to dog sledding in Alaska, Wil Wiemann shares his travel adventures

Swimming with dolphins, parasailing, sledding with huskies on a glacier in Alaska – these are just some of the adrenalin-fuelled activities that Wil Wiemann has been lucky enough to enjoy in recent years.

They're extraordinary experiences, but what's even more extraordinary is the fact that they've all taken place since Wil has been using a wheelchair.

"Actually, they call me a 'walker' as I can still get around – slowly – on crutches, but I use a wheelchair for most things outside the house," says Wil, who turns 60 this year. "I've got idiopathic progressive spastic paraplegia – the 'idiopathic' bit means they don't know what's causing it. It's undiagnosed and untreatable, but basically I'm gradually being paralysed from the legs up."

It all started back in 2000, when Wil noticed some tingling in his left leg. "It was just like pins and needles," he says. "I went from physio to GP to orthopaedic surgeon to neurologist, who did all the tests you can imagine, trying to find out what

was going on. But eventually, after about six months, they gave up. They said, 'We don't know what it is, but we'll keep monitoring you and see if it gets worse.'"

And, gradually, it has: the paralysis is slowly spreading up Wil's body.

"These days my left leg is about 95% paralysed, and my right leg is about a third paralysed," he says. "I've lost sensation in various degrees right up to my nipples. Above that, my upper body is fine... for now."

For Wil, the first 12 years were the craziest. "I was like a dog with a bone, trying to get a diagnosis," he says. "I've seen more than 35 different specialists." Then, in 2013, exploratory surgery that was supposed to put him out of action for just two weeks turned into a week in intensive care, nine weeks at two different hospitals, and three months as an outpatient. And *still* nobody could give him a definitive diagnosis – or even tell him if the progression would ever stop. And his chronic pain persisted.

Wil and his son Chris, dog sledding in Alaska

At the top of the tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai

Wil and Katrina at one of their bucket-list destinations: Bora Bora

“That operation knocked me about so much that afterwards I not only stopped trying to get a diagnosis, I also called time on my career as a property valuer,” says Wil.

It was at this point he said to his wife, Katrina: “If we want to do some travelling we need to do it *now*, before I get worse.”

Apart from a few trips with his parents when he was younger, Wil had never really travelled much overseas. “And then I got married, and my wife and I spent the next couple of decades focussing on our careers and our children.” And eventually, of course, on Wil’s health. After his epiphany in 2013 they

“An unforgettable highlight during our time in Alaska was a helicopter ride... onto a glacier to go dog sledding.”

spent the next few years getting his exercise regime sorted and modifying their house to better suit Wil’s needs.

Finally, in 2017, they were ready to start travelling – and to ramp up the thrill factor. First up: a fantastic trip to Western Australia, to go swimming with dolphins. “We took a wheelchair on a plane for the first time, to test if travelling with my disability was ‘do-able,’” says Wil. “We quickly realised it was – as long as my wife was in charge of the suitcases! That same year we also went parasailing on the

Gold Coast, which was super-exciting and something that I thought I’d never be able to do.”

These two experiences gave Wil the confidence to consider a bigger trip, and so in 2018 they headed off for 13 weeks in Europe.

“After stopping in Dubai for a few days we flew to Barcelona and cruised the Mediterranean for a week. Our kids Courtney, now 27, and Chris, now 24, joined us in Venice and we spent a month driving around Italy, Slovenia, Austria and Germany. The kids flew home and then Katrina and I went on a river cruise from Amsterdam to Budapest, before boarding another cruise which took us from Rome to Singapore via the Suez Canal, Jordan, India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. We spent a final week in Singapore and then headed home.”

The whole trip was so great they thought, “Let’s do it again!” and so the following year the entire family took a dream trip to Alaska and Canada.

“An unforgettable highlight during our time in Alaska was a helicopter ride from Juneau, up into the mountains and onto a glacier to go dog sledding. My son Chris hopped on the back of the sled and took control of the steering and braking, while I sat in the front and enjoyed every exciting moment.” recalls Wil.

The scenery was magical and the excitement of the dogs was infectious. “They absolutely love pulling the sleds and are so fast you actually have to brake to slow them down,” says Wil. “But be warned: they pee and poop on the run, so when you’re sitting behind them you have to keep your mouth shut!” ➤



Parasailing on the Gold Coast



Wil and Katrina enjoying beautiful Vienna

Later, the family cruised down to Vancouver and spent a few weeks exploring the west coast of Canada, before the kids flew home and Wil and Katrina took a final cruise all the way from Vancouver to Sydney.

“For people in wheelchairs, cruising is a great way to see the world,” says Wil. “There are options to suit just about every ability, the staff are so helpful, and you get to visit places you’d probably never have the chance to see otherwise – it’s how I got to tick Bora Bora off my bucket list!”

He and Katrina were all set to book more overseas trips, when COVID hit. The furthest they’ve managed to travel since then is the Whitsundays, where a catamaran proved perfect for Wil and his sailing-mad family. “It was quite stable on the water and had handholds everywhere so I could hold on and drag my legs around as I politely barked orders to the crew – i.e. my kids!” laughs Wil.

But with international travel now back on the cards, Wil has his sights set on his dream destination: Antarctica. Getting his wife to visit this breathtaking wilderness is going to require a bit of persuasion, however, as she’s not a fan of the cold. But if anyone can get Katrina to change her mind, it’s Wil. No wonder her nickname for him is “The Determined German”! **A**

To read more member stories, visit spinal.com.au

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Born to fly

Thinking about going skydiving?
Read on for this first-timer's account



When the opportunity arose for Konnah Ruru to go skydiving in Western Australia earlier this year, he seized the moment.

“It’s not something I’d ever thought about doing before,” he says, “but the minute I had the chance to go I just went yep, ‘I’ll be into that!’”

Konnah, 29, who lives in Baldivis, about 45 kilometres south of Perth, even got to pick the date for his big jump. “They told me that the best time of the year for skydiving in this part of the world is March,” he explains. “Well, March 18 just happens to be my birthday, so it seemed like the perfect day to go.”

But first things first: Konnah had to get his GP to sign off on the jump. That’s because at age 16, while in his second year of an apprenticeship to become a butcher, Konnah was in a car crash. He woke up in the

Intensive Care Unit 32 days later to discover he'd sustained life-threatening spinal cord injuries and the diagnosis was incomplete C4 quadriplegia.

Today, he's a presenter with the Paraplegic Benefit Fund (PBF), and for the past four years has been giving RAC road safety presentations to schools, juvenile justice and the youth prison in Perth, sharing his story with the youth of WA.

"I tell the kids about the lifestyle I was living before I had my accident and how that influenced my actions," he says. "I come from a background of gangs and was always in trouble. I was doing young, dumb, reckless stuff and making bad decisions – like getting into the car on the day of my accident."

Konnah's confronting and very personal story highlights the perils of peer pressure and the consequences of actions, and it really resonates with the young people he shares it with. "Youth work is definitely my strong suit," he says. "Helping influence young people in positive ways is so rewarding."

Getting the medical sign-off to go skydiving was also rewarding, and after his doctor gave Konnah the green light it was all systems go for his epic birthday present.

"I did the jump with Skydive Australia and they were awesome," he raves. After extensive pre-jump preparations, the team met with Konnah and his family on the day. They fitted him with a harness and drove him in their van to Mandurah airport, around 20 minutes' drive from Konnah's home.

"At the airport we did a few final checks before they lifted me up into the plane and we started our ascent," says Konnah. "It was beautiful looking out over the coast, until we got so high and I could see nothing but blue. But I couldn't really take in the views anyway – I had other things on my mind!"

Once they were up to about 15,000 feet and Konnah had been hooked up to his instructor, the big moment arrived and the plane doors opened.

"I felt pure adrenaline," he says. "I keep thinking, 'I'm about to do this, I'm about to do this – OMG, I'm really doing this!'"

"And then, as my legs were literally hanging out of the plane, the instructor said: 'When we're in free fall, breathe through your nose or else you're going to pass out'. When I asked him why he didn't mention this earlier, he said: 'Because if I did, most people wouldn't get on the plane!'"



With the words still ringing in his ears, Konnah and his instructor jumped.

"There was a period of about two minutes when we were in free fall, travelling at almost 300 kilometres per hour," remembers Konnah. "It was amazing. I just wish I'd kept my head up during this time so I could take everything in, but I kept it tucked in because I was freaking out a bit."

The reason why? Because his legs were going into spasm.

"People with SCIs have a lot of spasms, so Skydive Australia fitted me with a special leg harness. It's a strap that connects to the instructor's hands – he pulls it as we're coming in to land and it lifts my legs up," explains Konnah.

"It all sounded good in theory, but during free fall, as my legs went into spasm and really straightened out, I thought there was no way this harness could work – I just didn't think it would be strong enough to bend my legs," he says. >



An elated Konnah, back on land after his exhilarating jump.

“But then the parachute opened and boom, we weren’t hurtling through the sky anymore. Instead of free falling, we were slowly gliding through the air. It was calm and my whole body relaxed. Everything was at ease – including my legs. It felt like we were just floating. It was awesome.”

They did a few twists and turns, and then the instructor pulled on the harness. And... it all worked exactly as it was supposed to! “Landing took about two seconds, and was so easy and comfortable,” says Konnah. “Everything happened exactly as they had said – I didn’t need to worry at all.”

“Everything was at ease – including my legs. It felt like we were just floating. It was awesome.”

They landed on the beach at Rockingham Foreshore, where the Skydive Australia crew unhooked Konnah from the harness and the parachute, lifted him from the sand and took him back to his wheelchair. It was all so smooth and well organised.

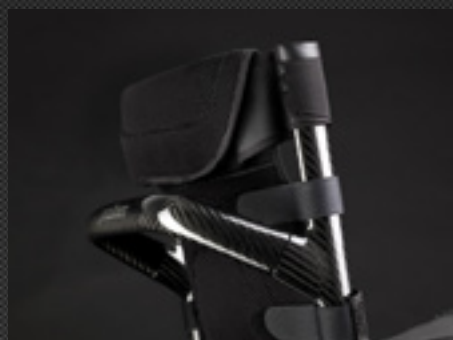
“I thanked them for the incredible experience and then left to continue celebrating my birthday – and let adrenaline slowly start to go down! It was amazing and I’d definitely do it again,” he says. “It would be awesome to do a jump with a group of my friends. They’ve got skydiving on their bucket lists now, and when we’re all financially able, it’s happening.”

In the meantime, Konnah has some words of advice for anybody with a spinal cord injury considering going skydiving for the first time...

“You only live once – live life in the fast lane, is what I say! If you’re an adrenaline junkie, or you used to be, it’s definitely a great way to get the adrenaline pumping through your body.” [A](#)

To read reviews of skydiving experiences near you, visit accessibleaustralia.com.au

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Tips & Tricks



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NEW REHABILITATION AND FITNESS HUB READY TO SUPPORT YOU

We were thrilled to host an Open Day at our new Healthy Living Centre Brisbane and show guests what we're all about.

The Open Day, held on Saturday 28 May, was a chance to share more about the recently opened Centre, which delivers essential therapy and rehab services all in the one place.

The Centre's Fitness Hub features state-of-the-art HUR equipment, which has been designed for people to wheel in, so no need to transfer, with the ability to swipe a Smart Card that changes the settings of the machine to suit your personalised training program.

The Fitness Hub can be accessed independently, with casual passes for \$16.50, or if you'd like to visit more regularly, there are options for three, six and 12 month memberships.

Below is a little more about the services that are offered at the Centre – feel free to contact our friendly team if you have any questions!

Exercise Physiology

Our Exercise Physiologists work closely with people with spinal cord damage and other physical disabilities, developing tailored exercise programs to prevent or manage acute pain, increase movement and mobility, to meet your goals.

Physiotherapy

Our Physiotherapists can assist you to reduce and manage pain, maintain and improve flexibility, improve movement and coordination, as well as rehabilitate after an accident

or surgery, and will also provide tailored exercise programs when needed.

Occupational Therapy

Our Occupational Therapists offer support in a range of areas including finding the right assistive technology for you; conducting functional assessments; motor vehicle and home modifications; seating and postural assessments; pressure mapping and pressure risk reduction; and skills for daily living. The OTs also offer an onsite Driving Clinic to assist people to return to driving.

Community Nursing

Our nurses are available in the Centre for one-on-one sessions, assisting with things like bladder and bowel management; wound care management and assessments; tracheostomy changes and ventilator issues; and general health assessments, including diabetes management, medication reviews and more.

Assistive Technology

Meet with our Assistive Technology Mentor and visit our specially designed room to check out the latest innovations and home automations, including a fantastic kitchen set-up! [A](#)

The Centre is located at 109 Logan Road in Woolloongabba. To find out more, visit spinalhealthyliving.com.au/brisbane

My Cairns adventure

Member Daryl Henbery shares more about his Cairns holiday and his stay at the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre



The Cairns Esplanade lagoon

I recently went on holidays to Cairns for five nights and stayed at Spinal Life's Healthy Living Centre. I was so impressed with the level of accessibility that I have decided to share my experience with other members and encourage them to use the Centre.

After checking in at the Centre, we found our two-bedroom apartment had a spacious open plan kitchen and lounge area. This led into a large main bedroom with two single beds that could be made up as one queen; while there was also a smaller bedroom that my support worker used. There was an ensuite from the main bedroom which also opened up to the second room if needed. The ensuite was large with an open shower, toilet and vanity that were all wheelchair accessible. There was also another smaller shower in the laundry area which my support worker used. There was a large balcony with table and chair so we could sit outside. The apartment also came with all the mod cons of large TVs, cooking utensils, cutlery and crockery and a modern stove, benchtop hotplate and large fridge; so you could easily prepare your own meals for long stays.

The benchtops can be height adjusted at the push of a button and lights, blinds, fans, TVs, air-conditioning and doors can

be operated by using a tablet that is also provided. There are also buttons on the wall for door access, and the front door is operated by key card. The bedrooms came equipped with ceiling hoists and hi-low beds with pressure relieving mattresses. They even provide you with fresh towels, sheets and complimentary shampoo, soaps etc and housekeeping came twice weekly. So everything was completely accessible.

The Healthy Living Centre is conveniently situated across the road from the Esplanade which provides a leisurely 30-minute walk into Cairns city. We saw plenty of locals along the Esplanade and quite a few were wheelchair users. Halfway down the Esplanade there is Muddys Café which is a great place for breakfast and ideal for families, and further along is the Cairns Lagoon, a great wheelchair accessible swimming area. Dunwoody's Hotel is also about two minutes' walk away which is an excellent place for dinner. The nearby RSL is also a great place for lunch and dinner.

Our short stay was jam-packed. On the Wednesday, we travelled up to Port Douglas by wheelchair taxi to join the Quicksilver cruise out to Agincourt Reef.



From Port Douglas, the Quicksilver vessel was like a giant City Cat ferry and was fully accessible and steady on the water. Out on the reef there was a pontoon which was also accessible although the ramp was quite steep. They also provide a great buffet lunch. There is a hoist with a small chair which can lift people with disabilities into the water, however, as someone with quadriplegia I didn't have enough balance to sit in the chair. Although I could not access the water it was still a good day out on the water and the hour-and-a-half boat trip was also great. My support worker had a good day and was able to use all the facilities on the reef such as the glass bottom observatory, underwater submergible and snorkelling on the reef. Quicksilver Cruises recognise the companion card and give a 50 per cent discount, and I also got a 20 per cent discount because I couldn't access all the facilities.

On the Thursday, we took a train ride from Cairns up to Kuranda which left the Cairns Railway Station at 8.30am. The train has a carriage with plenty of room for wheelchairs and you can travel with your support worker. We were lucky on the trip up to have the carriage all to ourselves. There is provision to use tiedown straps, but I didn't find the slope to be so steep that I needed them. There is plenty to do in



Travelling on the train to Kuranda

Kuranda although because you are on top of a rainforest range it is quite hilly. We visited the Wildlife Park, but I found it too steep in my power chair, so we got a refund and enjoyed a good lunch at the pub instead. Queensland Rail provide concession rates and recognise the companion card.

There are plenty of things to do in Cairns itself with lots of restaurants, night markets and casino. We also visited the Cairns Aquarium, I thought it would be a quick 30-minute stay, however we ended up being there for two and a half hours and found it very interesting. Cairns Aquarium also recognises the companion card and gives concessions.

I had a great time and can't wait to book my next trip to Cairns and hopefully stay for longer next time! [A](#)

The Healthy Living Centre is located at 2-4 Smith Street, North Cairns. To find out more, visit spinalhealthyliving.com.au



Winter wellbeing

Our nursing team shares how to avoid cold weather calamities if you have a spinal cord injury

People with cervical and high thoracic spinal cord injuries often experience problems with body temperature regulation.

In a hot environment, the body normally sends a signal from the brain to the spinal cord saying it's overheating, and then prevents this by telling the body to cool down by sweating. And in a cold environment the signal sent to the brain makes the blood vessels constrict, to prevent hypothermia.

But when you don't have sensation, your body may not send these signals properly. After a spinal cord injury, individuals may struggle with body temperature regulation below their level of injury, causing the body to experience hyperthermia (hot) or hypothermia (cold).

A variety of factors can contribute to this – and some people will struggle with body temperature regulation more than others, as the outcomes of every spinal cord injury are unique. It's essential to understand potential triggers and be prepared...

Prevention

The most important thing is to avoid extreme temperatures; in cold weather, wear layers of warm clothing and make sure your hands and feet are kept dry and well covered to avoid frostbite.

Signs & symptoms

When your body temperature is low, you may experience things like shivering, slow breathing, pale skin colour, slurred speech and a weak pulse.

Tips for warming up your body

- Wear layers that will retain heat while allowing your body to breathe. When the temperature does drop, make sure to add layers: blankets, hats, gloves, and scarves. And don't forget your toes – socks and boots are worth it!
- Drink a warm beverage
- Use an electric blanket to warm up quickly (but be time-conscious and lower the temperature after a while to avoid overheating)
- Move to a warmer location
- Exercise (individuals with extensive paralysis should practice passive range of motion exercises with their caregiver to stimulate blood flow)
- Avoid cold packs and heat packs – you may not sense the extreme temperatures of these packs and could experience frostbite or burns.

Stay hydrated

A top priority should be keeping your skin moist. When the temperature drops, so does the humidity. Cold, dry air can cause skin to become parched. When cold air is heated, it becomes even drier, pulling more moisture from the skin. For overall health, the key is to stay hydrated. One of the first signs of dehydration is dry, itchy skin; a condition that can lead to cracking and the beginning of skin breakdown.

Watch out for Urinary Tract Infections

Many studies have established the link between Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) and cold weather. They're often a result of cold-induced diuresis – the need to pee more in cold weather. This is your body's way of preserving heat when it starts to experience a drop in temperature. When you're exposed to cold temperatures, your blood vessels constrict in order to concentrate blood flow around your vital organs, and away from your skin. As a result, more blood will flow through your body, specifically through your kidneys. And when your kidneys have more waste to filter out of your blood, they end up producing more urine than usual.

Luckily, a UTI as a result of cold-induced diuresis is preventable – follow these tips:

- Drink eight glasses of water each day. Keeping yourself hydrated will help your urinary system flush toxic waste effectively.
- Increase your Vitamin C intake. This immune system booster can provide protection against UTIs. It works by increasing the level of acidity of your urine, eradicating

the bacteria that can cause infections.

The best way to increase your daily Vitamin C intake? Eating fruits and veggies like oranges, kiwis, red peppers and grapefruit.

- Include D-mannose in your diet. Used as a nutritional supplement for people with active and frequent UTIs, this is a type of sugar that has antibacterial properties that can stop E. coli from latching on to cells in the urinary tract. Proper dosage is an important factor in the effective treatment of UTIs, however, so check with your doctor before taking.
- Cranberries. Raw cranberries and cranberry juice have always been used as a natural remedy for UTIs. Rich in proanthocyanidins, a chemical compound that can prevent bacteria (e.g. E. coli) from attaching themselves to your bladder, cranberries can thwart a possible bladder infection and reduce UTI frequency.

Physical activity

Exercise not only keeps you active, strong and healthy, but also helps you stay engaged, alert and occupied. While colder temperatures cause muscles to tighten up, exercise helps to reduce spasms as well as getting blood flowing to keep lower limbs warm. Exercise also helps combat anxiety and depression, which are often associated with winter. You could try a range of motion exercises daily to maintain bodily strength.

Be seen

With nights drawing in earlier, being seen in low light or darkness is an important safety priority in the winter months. Wear high-visibility clothing, add reflectors to jackets and bags, and consider adding a light kit to your mobility device.

To find out more about our Community Nursing service, visit spinal.com.au/nursing

Meet our nurses

DEB DENT

Community Nurse Specialist, Brisbane



After working for six years as a nurse in the Spinal Injuries Unit (SIU) at Princess Alexandra Hospital, Deb knows the medical complexities that come with sustaining a spinal cord injury. In 2020, she brought her skills and experience to Spinal Life as a Community Nurse Specialist in the greater Brisbane region. She assists clients with things like bladder and bowel management, continence assessments, wound assessments and dressings, NDIS assistance and more. Deb describes herself as a 'tragic but keen' golfer and says she's happiest when she's spending time with her family in Cairns or whipping up something in the kitchen.

PENNY SCOTT

Community Nurse, Brisbane



Penny started working as an enrolled nurse at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in 2010. In 2012 she moved to the SIU and started studying to become a registered nurse while working full time. Penny decided to join the Spinal Life team so she could keep working with patients she met during her time in the SIU, and see how they continue to progress. Outside of work, Penny enjoys cooking, walks and spending time with her two cats. The animal lover is also hoping to get a puppy in 2022.

ELLE SAINT

Community Nurse, Brisbane



After completing her nursing degree at Griffith University, Elle worked as a registered nurse in the SIU, before bringing her experience and knowledge to Spinal Life. She provides specialist in-home nursing services to improve the wellbeing and quality of life for clients with spinal cord damage, including bladder and bowel management, pressure sore and wound care, diabetes education, medication reviews, general health assessments and more. When she's not helping others, the former rural NSW resident enjoys settling down with a good book.

GEMMA GALLART CAMPOS

Clinical Nurse (RN), Brisbane



Gemma is a clinical nurse (RN) with more than eight years of experience in the industry. Originally from Spain, she's worked in hospitals across her home country and Australia, and is skilled in catheter changes, wound care, bowel management, health monitoring and more. Gemma loves sharing her culture with her clients and supporting them to achieve positive health outcomes. Outside of work, you'll find her playing tennis, spending time with her partner, and enjoying nature. [A](#)



Capital Beauty

More than inclusive, more than accessible

Australia's capital offers myriad attractions whatever your age, ability or needs. As the city's architects, Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin envisaged, Canberra is built for the people, incorporating oodles of open space to balance the corridors of power. Whether you love flowers, forests or wide open spaces, like to take it slowly or up the thrill factor, Canberra has you covered.

Natural attractions

Colloquially known as the Bush Capital, Canberra is literally surrounded by national parks, nature reserves and specialist gardens. Engage all your senses at the Australian National Botanic Gardens in the foothills of Black Mountain. There are many accessible paths within the 35-hectare garden, home to more than 70,000 native plants. Feel the dampness in the rainforest gully, inhale the fragrance of native flowers, listen to the birdsong and experience a bird's-eye view from the ramp-accessible paperbark treehouse. Wheelchairs and electric scooters are available for loan to visitors, and there is a hearing loop in the Theatre.

The National Arboretum Canberra, covering 250 hectares, is one of the world's largest living collections of rare, endangered and significant trees, including forests of cork oaks and Wollemi pines. It's home to the

National Bonsai and Penjing Collection of Australia, featuring miniature trees and landscapes, and Mununja the Butterfly Garden, depicting a dreamtime story of the Ngunnawal people. Mobility scooters are available for loan to visitors.

At Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, predator-free fencing ensures wildlife abounds. Look for platypus and rock wallabies from the wheelchair-accessible path through The Sanctuary wetlands and spot koalas and potoroos on the fully accessible Koala Path in the Eucalypt Forest. A TrailRider (all-terrain wheelchair requiring Sherpas) is available for booking.

Walk with the animals, from alligators to zebras, at the National Zoo & Aquarium. Whether you love monkeys or meerkats, seahorses or sharks, frogs or snakes, you'll find them here. Mobility scooters and wheelchairs are available for loan to visitors.

Getting physical

Make a beeline for Boundless Playground on the foreshore of Lake Burley Griffin. Built to celebrate Canberra's centenary using state-of-the-art design, it's the city's first all-abilities playground. With low swings and sensory features including water play, it will keep kids entertained for hours.



Bound through the whimsical woodland that is POD Playground at the National Arboretum Canberra. Based on the idea that seeds are the beginning of life in a forest, there are acorn cubby houses fashioned out of timber that appear thrown into the air, banksia pod huts and nest swings. Net tunnels and slides connect the cubbies and there are music-making instruments.

Go on safari in the Adventureland playground at the National Zoo & Aquarium. Explore the large treehouse with rock-climbing posts and a three-metre-high slide, net climbers, an inclusive swing, flying foxes, and full-size animal structures that will ensure maximum playtime for the kids during your trip to the zoo.

Lake Burley Griffin, constructed by damming the Molonglo River, may be man-made but it imparts a natural beauty to the city centre. Encircled by a 30km pathway it's perfect for a lakeside cycle or stroll.

Up the excitement at Vertikal Indoor Snow Sports, where variable incline treadmills of white nylon fibre give you the thrills of skiing or snowboarding without the chills of slushy snow. Vertikal promise 'If there's a will to ski, we'll make it happen,' with staff happy to discuss your needs regarding mobility, vision, hearing or autism. Instructors remotely control the pitch and speed of the slope, so you can snowplough down a gentle incline or shred a downhill run. Reward yourself with an après-ski beverage and pizza beside the open fire.

Downtime

After an action-packed day it's good to know there are plenty of accessible accommodation options. QT Canberra is a light, bright, city hotel with a cheeky-chic vibe. Think crisp black and white, cool greys and shimmering sheers accented with pops of citrus in the lobby and guest rooms, while Capitol Bar & Grill

channels an industrial mood. The 205-room hotel has two wheelchair-accessible rooms.

Crowne Plaza Canberra, operated by Intercontinental Hotels Group, offers more traditional décor, with views of neighbouring Glebe Park. The vast atrium floods light into the spacious central public areas, where Redsalt Restaurant serves modern Australian cuisine. The 296-room hotel has several rooms that are soundproof and have teletypewriter.

Getting around

If you're flying to and from the capital then utilise Canberra Airport's accessible services, from meeting and greeting to assistance with boarding, disembarking and wheelchairs. Visit their Special Assistance webpage and make arrangements before you fly. City buses and trams, including the Hop-on-Hop-off tourist bus, are wheelchair-accessible with visual and auditory stop information. A Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Service (WATS) participates in the Taxi Subsidy Scheme and accepts interstate vouchers.

More

VisitCanberra actively supports inclusive tourism. GetAboutAble is a Canberra-based social enterprise that promotes accessibility and inclusivity in the tourism sector. With financial support from the Australian Capital Territory, GetAboutAble is working with VisitCanberra and Canberra's mainstream tourism sector to better cater to customers with disability.



Find more accessible things to do and book your next holiday in Canberra: More than Inclusive, More than Accessible at getaboutable.com/canberra-tcmf or by scanning the QR code.

Media credit: Threesides Marketing for production, Missing Bits for video, Mode Imagery for photography





Who ya gonna call?

When organisations need disability awareness training for their staff, there's only one place to call

When the Museum of Brisbane needed some expert help recently, they turned to Spinal Life Australia.

The Museum, which sits on level three of Brisbane City Hall, had obtained grant funding to give their staff and volunteers some awareness training. The goal? To help improve access and inclusion for people with disability.

After engaging specialists relating to vision and hearing impairment, the Museum team approached Spinal Life to deliver workshops focusing on people with physical disabilities, including those who use a wheelchair.

"We held two sessions over two separate days; one for the Museum's front-of-house staff and one for their administration staff," says Dane Cross, Senior Advisor – Access, Advocacy and Grants.

Spinal Life's workshops can be delivered in a couple of different ways. One is an immersive, hands-on type of experience where participants get a taste of what it's like to have a disability by having to navigate the workplace or venue while using a wheelchair.

"The other way – which is what we did for the Museum of Brisbane – is a more traditional workshop-style presentation," says Dane. "But we don't get up there and just spout facts: we like to incorporate our personal stories and lived experience."

This approach gives people a unique insight into living with a disability, and also helps to challenge stereotypes.

"I get up and say, 'I'm married, I'm a dad, I get my kids to school, I work full time, and on the weekends I like going

fishing and coaching my kids' soccer team. And, oh yeah, I also use a wheelchair,'" says Dane.

"And then I tell them that I also like to take my kids to experience places like the Museum of Brisbane, and ask them what it can offer me – as a husband, father of two, and a wheelchair user. It makes them realise that – like so many other people like me – I'm not really limited by my disability. It gets them thinking in a different way."

The team is very open during awareness training and definitely encourage questions. "Our motto is: if you're game to ask, we're game to answer," says Dane.

It's a presentation style that clearly went down well at the Museum of Brisbane, prompting the following follow-up message from their Head of Experience, Cathy de Silva:

"I've had feedback from multiple people saying how much they enjoyed the training. Other sessions we have done have been very focused on one topic, but I've heard that the team really appreciated the lived experience but also the broader discussion about other disabilities was really valuable. I have applied for funding again for the next financial year and hope to extend this training program and some venue audits. Thank you again!"

With more forward-thinking organisations lined up for similar awareness training workshops, it looks like Dane and the team are going to be busy in the coming months. [A](#)

To enquire about an awareness training workshop with Spinal Life, visit info.spinal.com.au/bookawarenesstraining

Photo: museumofbrisbane.com.au/visit-us/access/mob-social-story/



Advice for adventure seekers

Tips from our Peer Support Facebook group

Starting something new can be a challenge, especially if it's something you've never tried before, or you've had an injury and need to adapt to a new way of doing things.

When putting together this adventure issue of *The Advocate*, we asked members of our Peer Support Spinal Life Australia private Facebook group to share their own experiences and tips to get started.

We asked: what would you say to a 'younger version of you' when it comes to trying new sports or having a new adventure?

Here are some of the gems they've shared.

"The first thing I'd tell my younger self is to stop letting fear block your path. The best things happen when you embrace fear and push yourself to get outside your comfort zone." **Natasha Price**

"I got told there's no way you can ever ride a horse again, I've been doing it for the last 30 years and just got a new horse this week to help push me to do more." **Ingrid Bayly**

"I would simply tell my younger self not to pass up the opportunity to try something new." **Peter Steenstrup**

"Just because you have an SCI does not mean the end of your world. Since my diagnosis of paraplegia 13 years ago I have travelled the world and Australia with my trusty TiLite wheelchair. Lots of challenges, but we have had lots of fun!" **Bill Simpson**

"Don't be afraid to try anything new, ask plenty of questions for preparation and sometimes... just jump on in and give it a go straight away. You learn so much and valuable life lessons come from this." **Lindsay Nott**

Join the Peer Support Spinal Life private Facebook group.
Sign up at facebook.com/groups/peersupportspinalifeaustralia

Getting to know...

Personal Support Worker, Shelley Smallwood



If you live in Townsville and you're a Spinal Life Australia member, chances are you know Michelle Smallwood (but please call her Shelley!).

To celebrate Shelley's fantastic work and her eighth year as a Personal Support Worker (PSW), we asked this country music-loving Spinal Life superstar a few questions...

What three words describe you best?

"Honest, outgoing and adventurous."

Have you always been a Personal Support Worker, or did you start off in another role?

"I'm a nurse by trade, however I made the decision to come and work for Spinal Life Australia eight years ago in order to be able to experience something different and build rapport with clients in a one-on-one setting."

What do you think are the main qualities somebody needs to be a good PSW?

"Patience, empathy, a bubbly personality and rapport-building skills. You need to understand and anticipate your clients' needs, and be passionate about work in the human services sector."

What's the most important advice you would give anyone thinking of becoming a PSW?

"It's a very rewarding job, but it does come with challenges and situations that you may not always be prepared for or feel comfortable with, so you need to be flexible and able to think quickly and act accordingly."

What's the funniest moment you've had on the job?

"When I was supporting a client to have a shower and the biggest cockroach I have ever seen flew at us. I wanted to run and the client was joking and saying 'It's every man for himself!' I went in with the client, armed with

a can of Mortein and a mop, and the two of us laughed about it for weeks."

What's the most life-affirming moment you've ever had while on a job?

"When, after months of waiting, a client who used a manual wheelchair that was slowly breaking down finally received an electric wheelchair that was tailored to meet his needs. Instead of relying on taxis to get around and PSWs to push his manual wheelchair, this electric wheelchair provided him with real independence. It was a beautiful thing to witness."

What's the one thing you wish people understood better about people with spinal cord injuries?

"That they like to be treated the same as everyone else; they're no different."

How do you relax when you're not at work?

"I like to have a couple of beers while listening to music. I love country music, and my eldest daughter, Zy, and I have sung and played guitar together for more than 10 years. I enjoy gardening and being outdoors... and spending time with my dog! I have a pedigree poodle called Kuminji. I also love riding horses and am about to become a horse owner."

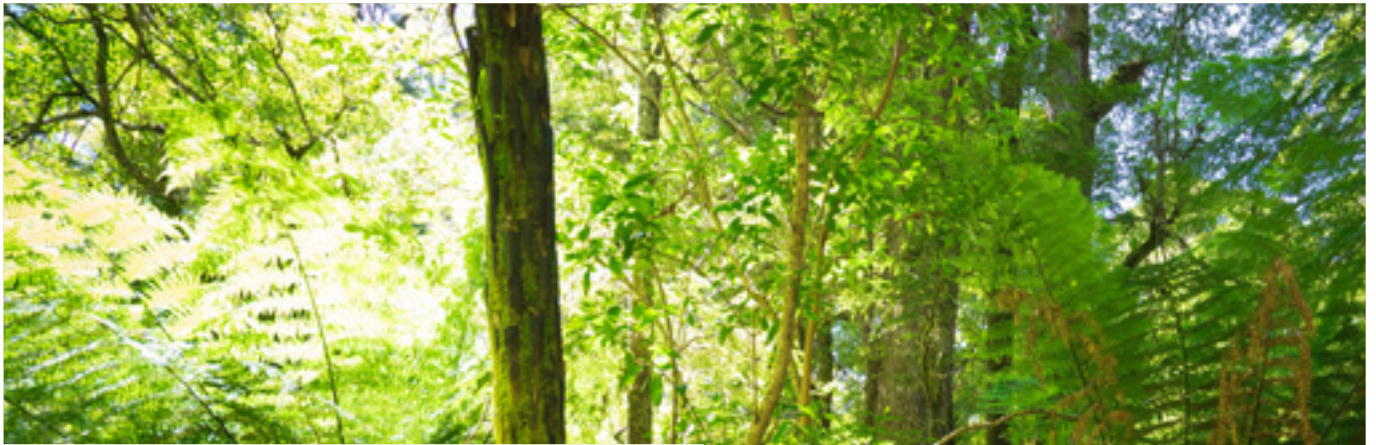
What's the best thing about your job?

"Working with people and being able to have a good laugh on the job with a client. Making a difference to people's lives."

What one thing could make your job easier?

"I can't think of anything at the moment! My CSO, Gayle, and all the girls in the Townsville office are very supportive and understanding – it's one of the reasons I've remained as a Personal Support Worker for so long." **A**

To nominate a Team Member to feature in a future issue, email theadvocate@spinal.com.au



SPINAL LIFE GOES GREEN

Sustainability may seem a popular buzzword, but there's so much more to it than recycling and conserving water (although those are important aspects of sustainability).

The team at Spinal Life are commencing the organisation's sustainability journey, and are asking like-minded members of our community to share feedback too.

A great definition of sustainability is *meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*.

Board Director Michelle Wilson, who is leading the charge, said the team were being guided by the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, which are a blueprint for protecting the planet.

"We are exploring ways we can genuinely make a difference, by changing the way that we do business," Michelle said.

"This may include the way we manage electricity and water at each of our sites, the paper and other waste generated, fuel used where our team travel to clients each day, air travel when required and the advocacy we undertake, just to name a few – all of these items impact our external environment, and we need to ensure that we are making the best use of every resource available to us.

"It is not only what Spinal Life does that matters – we are also looking at our suppliers and other stakeholders and how they are incorporating sustainability into their businesses.

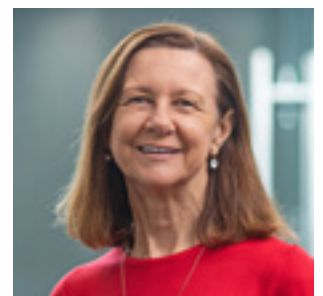
"Once we have set some goals for improvement, we will also be looking at industry innovations to see how they could be implemented to benefit everyone we work with, every day."

To share your feedback on impacts that we need to consider, suggest improvements, or become further involved in the sustainability project, email sustainability@spinal.com.au



MEET MICHELLE

A self-confessed 'tragic' for numbers, Michelle Wilson first joined the Spinal Life Board in 2019, with an impressive background as a tax, accounting, superannuation and governance specialist.



Michelle recently undertook additional sustainability studies with the Global Reporting Initiative, which helps organisations to understand and better manage their impacts on people and the planet. [A](#)

BUNGEE!

Celebrating Rohan Sills' record-making Australian first



When Rohan Sills went bungee jumping recently, he had just one word for it: “epic”.

But this was no regular bungee jump. This was jumping from the *roof* of a 50-metre-high bungee platform... and doing it in a wheelchair.

Rohan, 32, from Ipswich, flew off the roof and into the record books, becoming the first person in Australia to make this sky-high jump in a wheelchair. Epic, indeed.

We caught up with Rohan to ask him about his daring plunge.

Have you always been a lover of adventure?

“I was always very active – I played soccer for 18 years, as well as loads of other sports. And I’d always wanted to do things like bungee jumping and skydiving; I just never got around to it. But I nearly died when I had my accident, and that makes you start to really appreciate life. It gives you even more incentive to get out there and do the things you want to do.”

When was your accident?

“In 2016. I was a carpenter, working on a construction site and fell through a stair void onto a concrete slab three metres below. It wasn’t fun, I don’t recommend it. I sustained a T5

complete injury and was told I’d never walk again.”

So how did this whole bungee record come about?

“I’d always wanted to do a bungee jump, so last year me and my mates Ben and Toby decided okay, let’s do it. We did it at Sky Park in Cairns, with the adventure sports company AJ Hackett. We jumped from the standard platform that everyone uses and it was awesome. But while we were there we noticed the slanted roof on *top* of the bungee tower, and people running down it, riding their BMX bikes off it and just doing all sorts of crazy bungee stuff. We thought that if we ever went back, it’d be cool to see if I could take off from the roof in my wheelchair. So in February this year, after speaking to the park to make sure everything was do-able, I did it!”

What was involved?

“Ben and Toby, who came with me again, took on the hard job of carrying me up the stairs to the main platform. One at the front and one at the back, they dragged me and my chair up, step by step. Once we got there, four people from the park then helped me onto the roof. They can also carry you up the first stairs as well, if you’re not travelling with friends as crazy as Ben and Toby. Because we’d done the regular jump the previous

year, the nerves weren’t quite as bad. Although they did kick in once we got to the top and realised how high up we were!”

So what was it like?

“It’s just an amazing feeling. I tell everybody, whether you’re in a chair or not, that you should definitely give bungee jumping a go. You might be scared at the time, but after you do it, you just want to go straight back up and do it again.”

So what’s next?

“I want to take things further – next up, we want to go overseas and do a bigger jump! I’m also training to do paratriathlons – my dream is to represent Australia in the Paralympics. It’s been hard as I’ve pretty much had an operation every year since I’ve been in the chair, but I’ve set a goal with my coaches and we’re aiming for the Commonwealth Games in Victoria in 2026.”

Any final words of inspiration to people considering a wheelchair adventure sport?

“One of my favourite quotes is: Don’t let other people’s impossible be yours.” **A**

If you haven’t seen the awe-inspiring and totally cool video of Rohan’s jump already, check it out on his Instagram ([@rohansills](https://www.instagram.com/rohansills))

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