

THE Advocate

A VOICE FOR ACCESSIBLE, EQUITABLE AND EMPOWERED LIVES | SPRING/SUMMER 2023 ISSUE

**Advice from
our AT Mentor**

**Robots
revolutionising
rehab**

**Sand, surf and inclusion:
The beach wheelchairs
making waves**

**Assistive
Technology
in the home:**

WHAT WORKS FOR OUR MEMBERS

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF

Spinal Life
AUSTRALIA

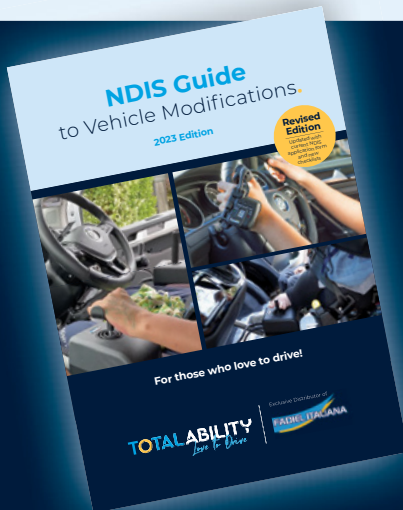
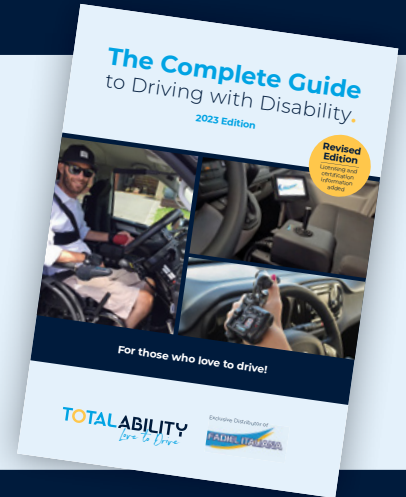
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Investing in innovation

Assistive technology (AT) is not just about high-tech gadgets that only the most tech-savvy person can use. In fact, it's a much broader term covering any equipment or devices that help you in your daily life.

From mobility aids to prescription mattresses to doorbells that alert you when someone is delivering a parcel, there are so many solutions out there for challenges you may be facing.

In this issue of *The Advocate*, we're sharing how some of our members are using AT around the home and for their work, showcasing how small changes have helped them in their everyday lives.

We're also providing key information on how the Spinal Life team can provide advice and support within this area, as well as how new developments are being inspired, including exoskeleton technology.

Over the years, the Board has had many discussions about how Spinal Life can best support our customers with AT, from choosing the right equipment to the availability of products and delivery timeframes.

As such, I'm pleased to share that Spinal Life Australia has invested in an equipment supply business, Move Mobility (formerly known as The Mobility Aid Shop). In doing so, our aim is to help people with disability have the best possible customer

experience when sourcing, trialling and purchasing mobility aids and other equipment.

Following the recent expansion of its store in Robina on the Gold Coast, Move Mobility will soon be opening a large new showroom in Shailer Park, and its first regional location by the end of the year. We are working hard to support the company to develop a great online presence for those of you who cannot visit in person, and we will be providing more details on this soon.

This investment is a clear example of the Board's commitment to ongoing financial sustainability while demonstrating leadership in our industry, and growing our organisation and services.

As we approach the end of the year, Spinal Life's Annual General Meeting has been scheduled for Thursday 23 November at 11am (AEST).

The AGM will be held at our Woolloongabba office, with an online link also available if you wish to participate from the comfort of your home.

All members will be sent further details in the coming weeks, so please keep an eye out to learn more about how you can have your say. [A](#)

GYL STACEY

DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?



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



3 QUESTIONS WITH THE CEO

Mark Townend

What's been happening in the advocacy space?

We were thrilled with the Queensland Government's recent announcement of a \$20 million investment to enhance the existing Spinal Injuries Unit (SIU), as well as plans to construct a modern replacement SIU at the Princess Alexandra Hospital.

This upgrade is something we have been advocating for over many years, to provide a larger, more contemporary facility with more staff and beds. We have been working closely with the Premier and Health Minister to share our advice, along with feedback and experiences that we've heard from our community.

Our goal is to see individuals with spinal cord damage receive the highest quality care in facilities that are both cutting-edge and compassionate, taking into account the many months that patients and their families spend in hospital during the rehabilitation process.

Can you tell me about the 'Precinct' planned for Brisbane?

When we built the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre in Cairns three years ago, the goal was to provide health, fitness and rehabilitation services, plus fully accessible accommodation, all in the one place.

In Brisbane, we opened a similar Healthy Living Centre in our existing Woolloongabba location more than a year ago, yet do not have the space for purpose-built accommodation or a hydrotherapy pool.

As a result, we have identified the need to expand to a bigger site and are looking at options near the Princess Alexandra Hospital, to provide valuable support and short-term

accommodation to people transitioning home from the SIU, as well as those needing respite and rehabilitation services.

We will keep you updated on any significant developments, along with opportunities to provide your feedback as we progress these plans further.

What else has been happening at Spinal Life?

We recently wrapped up Spinal Cord Injury Awareness Week for 2023, and this year's campaign was all about encouraging businesses to consider employing team members with a disability.

Our Access Consultants provide a range of one-on-one mentoring to businesses, disability awareness training workshops and audits, as well as advice on funding that's available for modifications if needed.

During the week, we shared videos and key messages across our social media channels and also conducted a hugely successful media campaign, with more than 200 mentions in the media reaching an estimated six million Australians! A special thank you to Venturer Technology, Peter Steenstrup and Brendan Somerville for helping us spread the word.

We have also secured two separate grants totalling nearly \$400,000 from the Queensland Government to continue our work in increasing employment opportunities for people with a disability in Ipswich and the Sunshine Coast and Wide Bay regions.

As always, please don't hesitate to contact me at ceo@spinal.com.au if you ever have any feedback or suggestions. [A](#)



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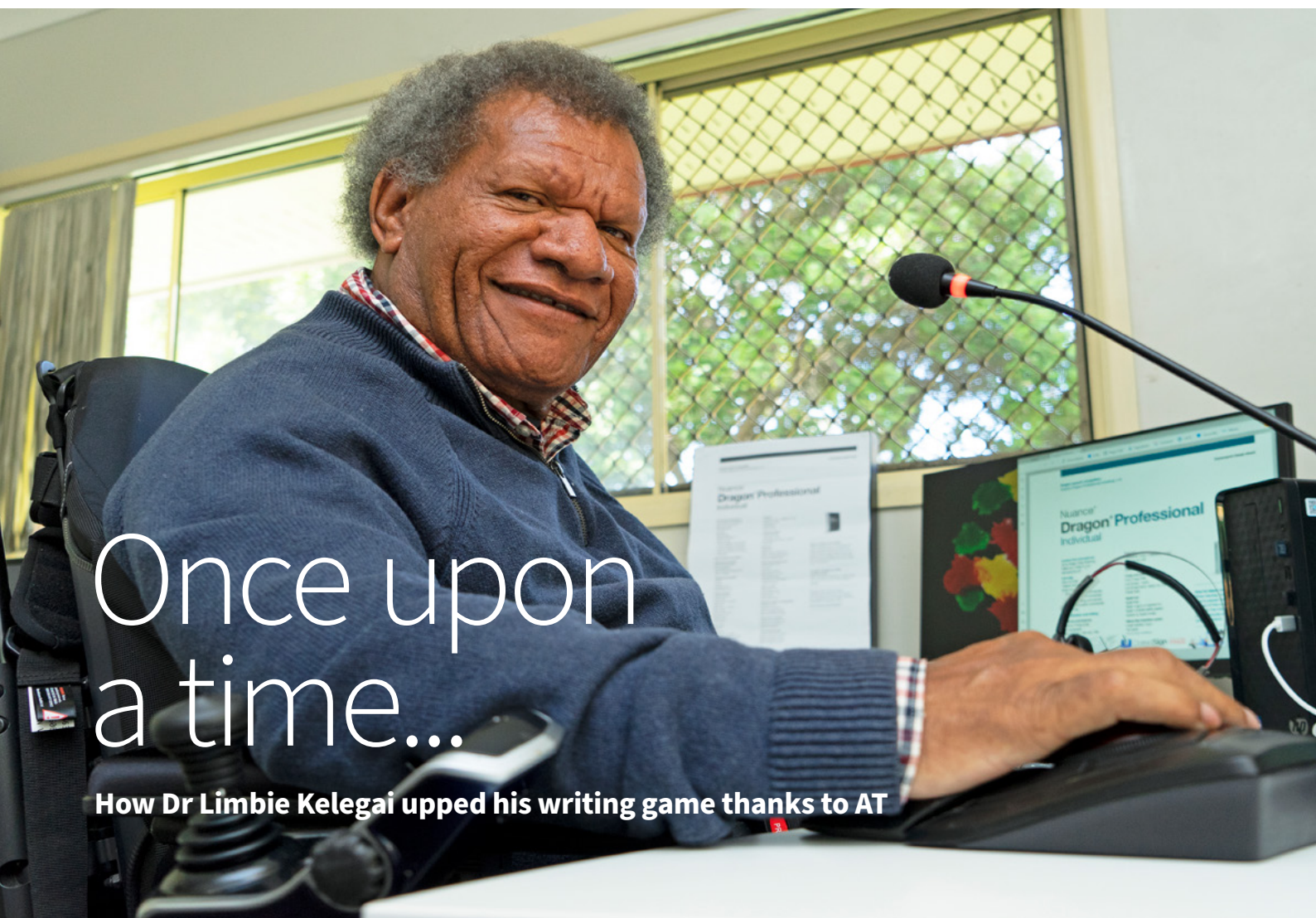


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about in the
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Once upon a time...

How Dr Limbie Kelegai upped his writing game thanks to AT

Dr Limbie Kelegai, 62, and his family love Australia and are proud to have called it home for the past 20-odd years, but his very first trip to this country was memorable for all the wrong reasons.

Limbie was 17 and living in Papua New Guinea when he had an accident during a rugby league game in 1980.

“I dived for a loose ball, hit my head on the ground, and then somebody came in with a knee and damaged my spinal cord,” he says.

He was taken to hospital in Lae, the second-largest city in Papua New Guinea, where the diagnosis was incomplete quadriplegia.

Limbie stayed in the hospital for three months, before his university raised funds to send him to Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney, where he remained in rehab for almost a year.

“The rehab in Sydney helped me physically, but more so mentally: it really, really helped me grow and become mentally tough,” he says.

The other thing that helped him? True love.

Three months before his accident, while visiting the hospital in Lae for a minor issue, he had met a student nurse called Rose.

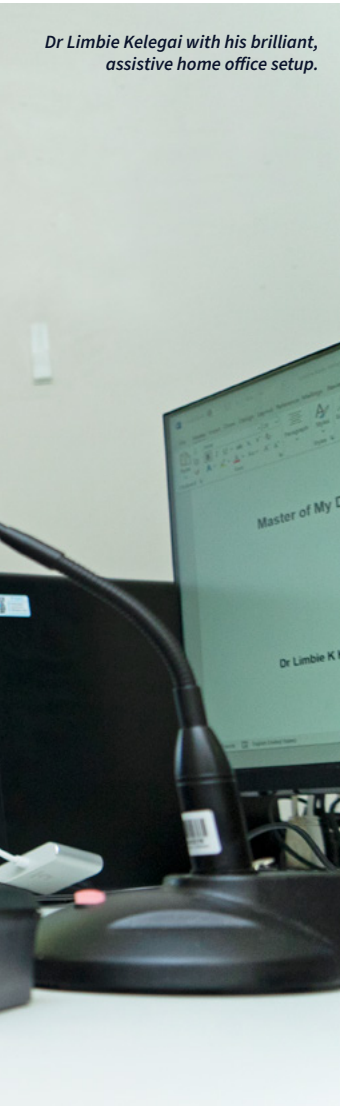
“Then, on the night of my accident, she happened to walk past as I was being wheeled into the emergency department. She came to check on me on that first night, and we’ve been together ever since; 43 years. We got married in 1981, and today we’ve got six kids and four grandkids – and we’re hoping for more grandkids!” says Limbie.

The same year Limbie married Rose, he also went back to university in Lae, at the PNG University of Technology.

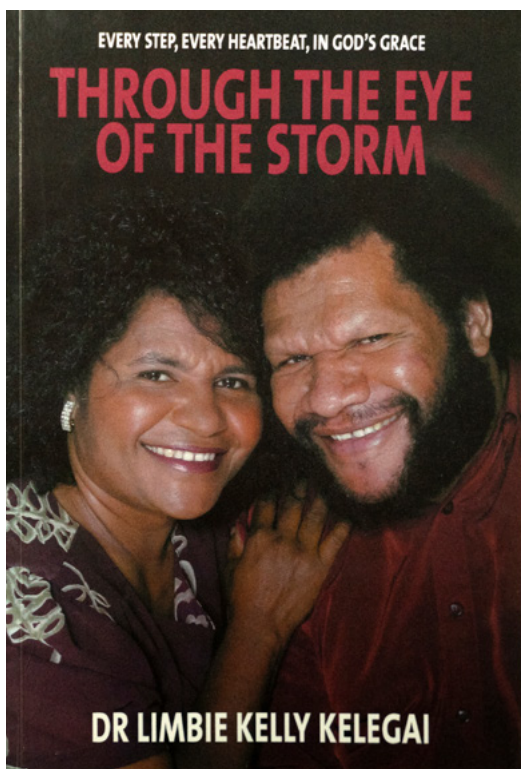
“Because of its physical demands I couldn’t go back to the mechanical engineering course I’d already been doing for two years, so I changed my course to computer studies,” he says.

Limbie admits that this period was very tough: “Just knowing that only one year before I’d been attending this same university and everything was fine was hard to deal with at first, and I felt like giving up. But then I realised that

Dr Limbie Kelegai with his brilliant, assistive home office setup.



Limbie with the love of his life, Rose.



The cover of Limbie's autobiography.

I had to prove that I was capable of doing it. Nothing was going to stop me. I was determined to reach the highest tier possible in my chosen profession. My motto was to never give up."

With help from the university, classmates, his family and of course Rose, Limbie graduated with an IT degree in 1983, and went on to work in the university's IT department. In later years he divided time between PNG and Australia, after being awarded scholarships to undertake his master's degree and finally his PhD at the Queensland University of Technology.

"When I started my PhD in 2000, my family came with me to Brisbane," he recalls. "And when I completed the program in 2005 we decided to stay here for good."

A terrifying incident had contributed to this decision to stay.

"I was back in PNG with Rose in order to collect data that I needed to complete my studies," says Limbie. "We were travelling in a car with my Mum when we were robbed at gunpoint and almost killed."

Six men with guns and machetes dragged Limbie and Rose out of the car, and pointed a gun at Rose's head before taking off with the car and all of the trio's money, watches and jewellery. Worst of all, they took Limbie's computers and the crucial data that he'd been working on for years. ➤

“It was a shocking, devastating experience, but it also reinforced my desire and commitment to continue with my studies,” he says. “I decided I wouldn’t give up, so I started the program all over again. It was really tough and added two full years to my program. My supervisor couldn’t believe I was doing it.”

After finally finishing his PhD, Limbie commenced work as a private IT consultant and never looked back.

He also worked on his other passion. Because, as it turns out, the IT boffin is also a bit of a writer.

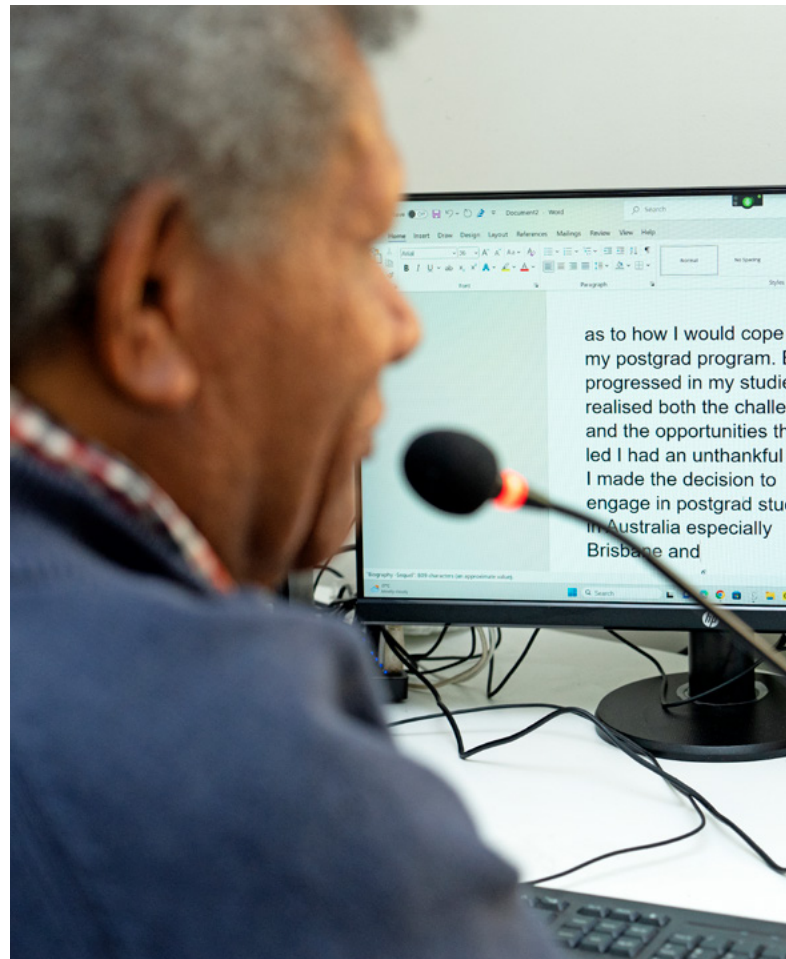
“Back in PNG in 1983, while I was still studying, I wrote a radio play with a colleague of mine who also had a spinal injury,” he says. “It was a drama about teenagers and university life, and a national radio station actually aired it. It encouraged me to pursue my writing and next up I wrote a book called *Sail Away the Midnight Sun*, which was awarded second prize in a national literature competition.”

Limbie continued to write novels, and then in 2009 decided to tackle his autobiography, which he called: *Through the Eye of the Storm: Every Step, Every Heartbeat, in God's Grace*.

“So many people back in PNG bought it, it was huge,” says Limbie. “The Governor-General of Papua New Guinea actually recommended it to the education department, and so lots of schools bought a lot of copies. I was told it helped many people with disability as well, so it was a great result.”

Limbie, who’s now “retired”, is hoping to commence post grad research studies in Information Systems and Business soon. He’s also working on sequels to both his autobiography and his last novel, as well as a biography of a former politician and provincial leader in Papua New Guinea, called *Sail on Son*. He’s finding the process a whole lot easier thanks to help he’s received from Spinal Life’s Assistive Technology team, Supports Coordinator Renata O’Hara and Belinda McLeod from the Back2Work program.

They helped him with a new home office setup, including the voice recognition software, Dragon, from Nuance.



“I had briefly looked into a few speech recognition software options, but I couldn’t believe what Dragon could do with its many features,” he says. “You simply talked, and the words would appear on the screen, and I could edit and make necessary changes and do numerous functions without using the keyboard. I was so amazed. I just wanted that software!”

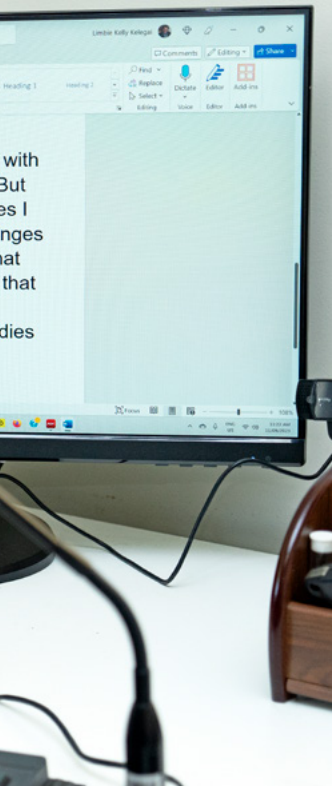
It’s been game-changing for Limbie’s writing.

“When I wrote my autobiography I typed every single letter myself and it took forever,” he says. “Dragon helps me achieve things in a fraction of the time. I just talk and it adjusts to my accent, does corrections and so much more. It was a learning process for the first few weeks, but once you get used to it, it’s very easy and so fast. It’s really, really good software and it’s made things so much easier for me.”

And he didn’t just get help with Dragon.

“There’s all sorts of stuff set up in the Spinal Life Assistive Technology showroom,” says Limbie, who was able to test

Limbie using the life-changing Dragon software.



Limbie with a copy of his autobiography – part two is on the way!

different keyboards, computer mice, earpieces, screens, microphones and cameras, and get advice from the AT and Back2Work teams about which would best suit his needs. He was even able to find the perfect, adjustable desk.

"It's so easy to get my wheelchair in and out from under my new desk; it's made my work space so much better," he says.

With Renata's help, Limbie was able to get everything funded through the NDIS. And when his new gear arrived, a member of the Assistive Technology team came to Limbie's house to set up his desk: as an IT expert, he was happy to handle the software side of things himself!

"I've got the perfect office setup now," he says. "I'm so happy that I went to Spinal Life: they did everything."

“... I was determined to reach the highest tier possible in my chosen profession. My motto was to never give up.”

Limbie has actually consolidated all of his services with Spinal Life, including physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and personal support and home care. Other assistive technologies, such as a hoist, have also made things much easier for his carers and wife.

"I just feel at home with Spinal Life, because they're focused on helping people with spinal cord injuries and understand the difficulties that go along with it," he says.

"The cooperation between the different departments makes processes very easy and fast. I'm so glad to have this cohesion and confidence when it comes to the services that I need, so that I can do the best I can in life." [A](#)

Visit spinal.com.au to learn more about our services.

While Limbie did have a pre-existing spinal cord injury, a new injury occurrence and admission to the Spinal Injuries Unit meant he was eligible for Back2Work, which is offered to patients at the Princess Alexandra Hospital.

Revolutionary robots

Life-changing technology that's helping people get back on their feet



In 2010 Daniel Hillyer was just 21 years old when a balcony railing gave way and he fell four metres.

"I was an apprentice chef at the time, managing a small team and working between several restaurants at Sydney Airport," says the New South Welshman, now 35. "When the accident happened I landed flat on my face, ended up in the Prince of Wales Hospital and eventually went through two surgeries to fuse my spinal cord at C4/5."

The diagnosis was incomplete quadriplegia, and Daniel was told that he would never move again from the neck down. During the 10 months he was in hospital, however, he started to notice some movement in his left big toe.

"I was told that it was just a spasm and not to think about it," he says. "But I totally kept focusing on it, because it *was* movement."

Refusing to accept the doctors' devastating prognosis, once he left hospital Daniel started seeing a personal trainer for strength and conditioning training, and attending a neuro-specific gym in Sydney.

"I went back to the basics: I learned how to roll, sit up, transfer and use my arms to drink and feed myself independently. I even re-learned how to stand and took my first steps," he says.

Opposite page: HAL training at RoboFit. This page: Dynamic duo, Maryanne and Daniel Hillyer



During this time Daniel's then-girlfriend, Maryanne Harris, was also hard at work. She had been studying exercise science at Wollongong University prior to Daniel's injury, and completed her studies about a year after his hospital stint.

It was while she was at a medical expo in Germany that Maryanne came across Cyberdyne; a Japanese robotics and technology company that was promoting its neuro-responsive exoskeleton suits.

"They combine both passive and active modes, so there's an autonomous mode which moves for the wearer, plus a feature that uses electrodes to read brain signals being

sent to the muscles, and then assist with movements," says Daniel. "So the robot walks *with* the user, not *for* them. Maryanne thought the technology was amazing and said she thought we should go to Japan to try it."

And so they did, heading off in 2013 on the first of many trips to undertake HAL (Hybrid Assistive Limb) training at Cyberdyne's headquarters in the city of Tsukuba.

"I went for 21 days," says Daniel. "When I arrived, prior to using the technology, I was able to walk about eight to 10 metres. But after just 21 days of training for two hours a day, I was able to walk three laps of their 26-metre walking track."

The improvements were astonishing, and Daniel returned to Japan the following year for another month of training.

"I didn't lose anything that I'd gained in that first year; I just continued to get stronger and improve," he says. "I saw improvements in my gait, walking and standing balance, and even with my bowel and bladder."

“ We quickly outgrew our premises, so had to move to a new space quite quickly... ”

In between visits Daniel continued training at his gym and with his personal trainer, and even managed to surprise Maryanne with a first dance at their wedding, when the couple tied the knot in 2017. For someone who was told they'd never walk again or have movement below their shoulders, it was quite the turnaround.

After seeing the promise that this technology offered, as well as the health benefits Daniel had gained since using the device as part of his rehabilitation journey, he and Maryanne were keen to bring it home.

"There wasn't anything like it in Australia, and we wanted to share it with our community," he says.

So after eight years, during which time Daniel continued with his HAL training and Maryanne received her master trainer certificate from Cyberdyne, which allows her to train other people and operate their clinics in Australia, they created RoboFit.

Launched in 2021, it's Australia's first robot-powered therapy centre, and combines traditional interventions like exercise physiology and physiotherapy with Cyberdyne's neuro-controlled exoskeletons. >

“We had 50-100 attendees at the launch in Wollongong and hit capacity within six weeks,” says Daniel, who is RoboFit’s operations manager, while Maryanne is the CEO. “We quickly outgrew our premises, so had to move to a new space quite quickly. We only moved down the road, but we went from about 75 square metres to just under 400 square metres.”

People at RoboFit undergo an initial assessment and ongoing therapies. “We’re seeing better results with people who do block training: a 90-120 minute session, five days a week, for a month to six weeks,” explains Daniel. “Ideally they’d do this three or four times a year, and continue doing their other daily training and programs in between.”

And the technology doesn’t just benefit patients with a spinal cord injury: it can also be used for people who have had a stroke, who have multiple sclerosis, or even for falls prevention in the elderly.

After the success of Wollongong, RoboFit opened a new clinic in Sydney in February this year. “Our big goal is to open up a clinic in each capital city in Australia, and in New Zealand as well,” says Daniel.

With the launch of their first Queensland clinic slated for October, they’re definitely on their way.

“We’re going to have about 70 square metres in Move Mobility’s huge new site in Shailer Park, where we’ll showcase our technology and conduct training programs,” says Daniel.

It’s an exciting time for the dynamic duo of Daniel and Maryanne, who recognised the extraordinary benefits of the HAL system from their very first encounters with it, all those years ago.

“It’s not going to be for everybody,” say Daniel, “but I know it could benefit a lot of spinal cord injury survivors. If we can help them to use the technology and be able to stand and take a step, or have a hug with a family member that they haven’t been able to embrace properly in years ... it’s so rewarding. It’s just amazing technology.” ^A

Visit robofit.com.au to learn more – and follow Spinal Life’s Facebook for news on Move Mobility’s store opening.



Tracy’s RoboFit journey

One of RoboFit’s clients, Tracy Adams, has been travelling from Brisbane to the Wollongong clinic every few months since October 2022 for treatments.

“I was diagnosed with polyneuropathy in 2013,” she says. “It’s a debilitating degenerative chronic disease that attacks and weakens the limbs. It affects my hands to some extent, but mostly my lower limbs, so I generally use a wheelie walker to walk, or a wheelchair for longer distances.”

Tracy first heard about RoboFit thanks to an internet search.

“There are other exoskeletons out there, but none match up to the intelligence of HAL’s technology. The more I read about HAL, the more I liked the idea that it learnt with me, rather than doing the work *for* me. HAL doesn’t ‘force’ me to do anything I don’t want to, it does what I want to do: we are a team. It encourages the development of new neural pathways which will improve my motor functions and ultimately helps me with my movement, strength, flexibility, balance and coordination. Everyone’s different, but I have found every visit has brought with it a benefit or improvement. I combine RoboFit with regular physio treatments, and even my local physiotherapists notice a difference when I return from a session.”

“Tracy’s been a huge advocate for getting us to Queensland,” says Daniel. “Now that we’re opening up in Brisbane, she’s going to have a much shorter journey!”



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New website coming soon: movemobility.com.au



Home sweet accessible home

The many benefits of pimping your crib





"I've been in pain since 1982," says Steven Fell, 60, who is so charming, cheeky and chatty that you'd never imagine what he endures 24/7.

It was on one fateful day in 1982 that Steven, then aged 18, living in New Zealand and about to start his third year in the army, borrowed a friend's motorbike.

"I'd never ridden one before," he admits, "and later in the day I had a head-on collision with a car. I have zero recollection of it, though. I think the body does that in order to block out the pain."

Steve was in intensive care for a month. The accident caused incredible damage to the left side of his body, including a broken arm and a broken leg. It also destroyed his knee. But the worst injury was to his pelvis.

I don't have paraplegia or quadriplegia," he says. "My claim to fame is that my pelvis was so badly smashed in the accident that it was never repaired. The doctors told my Dad that it had started knitting back together, but in the wrong place, and that if they re-broke it the blood loss would kill me. So it was left untouched and now my pelvis is out by about 40mm and doesn't support my body."

While Steven managed to walk out of the hospital, things would never be the same again.

"I was mobile, but it was painful to walk," he says. "And any footwear for my left leg had to be built up by 40mm. It made them really, really heavy and they've caused two more stress fractures over the years."



It's amazing how one little device can be such a big help.

Steven was eventually medically discharged by the army in 1986, at which point a friend recommended an overseas holiday. Steven bought tickets to Australia... and he never left.

"I'd always wanted to be a coach tour driver, doing tours around New Zealand," he says, "so when I got to Australia, I made it happen there instead."

After some initial training in Adelaide, Steve moved to Brisbane, and not long after that went for a job interview at a coach company. The first thing the owner said to him was, "What are you doing tonight?" and then gave him his first job: to drive a coach up to Cairns where it was needed for a tour. And he wasn't going to be alone.

"That's how I met my wife, Colleen, who was the 'hostie' for the Cairns job," he says. "We got to know each all the way up there and never looked back!"

For the next three years Steven enjoyed conducting coach tours around Australia with his partner in crime Colleen, followed by four years spent running day tours out of Brisbane.

"I could still walk during this time, but I was in terrible, terrible pain," he says. "However nothing was going to stop me from doing things. Eventually, in 2001, Colleen and I bought a Snap-on Tools franchise in Coopers Plains where we provided mechanics with the tools they needed to service customers' cars."

Steven has undergone intense and ongoing treatment, including having a spinal cord stimulator with two leads inserted in the epidural space at about the T10 level. ➤

“Over the years my pain specialist has whacked in more leads (they’re located just under the skin, not in the epidural space), and I now have eight nerve-stimulating leads throughout my body that are helping me 24 hours a day. The easiest way to explain it is that they trick my brain into thinking that there’s no pain. It’s as simple as that.”

Steven ultimately retired in March 2020. “We had the business for 19 years and I loved it until the last 12 months, when the pain got to be too much and I just couldn’t do it anymore.”

“These days the pain is still bad, but I can adjust the stimulator to a different setting, which helps,” he says. “But I can no longer walk and I can only stand to transfer. I started as a walker, and over time needed to use a walking stick, and then crutches, and finally I had to get a wheelchair.”

Any support he can get to make things easier is extremely welcome, which is why Steven was thrilled to get some help from Spinal Life’s Assistive Technology team recently.

It started with an initial consultation with Spinal Life’s Assistive Technology Mentor, Jocelyn (Jos) Stocker, at the Healthy Living Centre in Woolloongabba.

“I went to the Assistive Technology showroom and Jos showed me all these things that could make my life easier around the home, including how to turn lights and electrical appliances on and off by simply saying, ‘Hey, Google,’” says Steven. “The funny thing is, I’d already bought a Google Nest a couple of years ago, in order to get extended range for my internet – I just had no idea I could use it in this way! So Jos said, ‘Well, I’ll get somebody around to show you.’”

That person was Spinal Life’s IT specialist, Tommy Tustin, who does all the home installations and education. He was able to sort out Steven’s Google Nest in no time, and set up some lights by installing smart plugs that Steven had pre-purchased.

But for Steven, the most helpful thing that Tommy did that day was install a video doorbell.

“My house is split-level and Colleen and I live on the lower level. I *can* get to the other level, where the kitchen, lounge room and front door are all located,” he says, “but only by using a stair lift, and it takes a bit of time.”

Steven transfers from his wheelchair to the stair lift, and travels to the upper level where another wheelchair is waiting for him.

“The problem is that when delivery drivers arrive to drop off packages that need signatures, I can’t reach them in time.

“... I just say, ‘Hello, just leave it at the door please, sir or madam,’ and head up at my own pace to collect the parcel.”

They ring the bell, but by the time I get there, they’ve gone – and they take the packages with them.”

However, thanks to Steven’s new video doorbell, things have changed and there are far fewer visits to the post office to pick up missed packages.

“Now, when they ring the doorbell it comes through on an app on my phone,” he says. “I push a button and then I’m staring at the delivery driver and able to speak to them. So I just say, ‘Hello, just leave it at the door please, sir or madam,’ and head up at my own pace to collect the parcel.”

It only took Tommy two or three hours to install everything and show Steven how to use all the devices.


“It took me a little while to feel really comfortable and confident with everything, but that’s because I just like to take these things slowly and really get them fixed in my mind,” says Steven. “I couldn’t work out why things weren’t working for me at first, and then I remembered that you have to say, ‘Hey’ when you talk to Google Nest!”

Jos follows up every Spinal Life AT customer with a phone call six weeks after installation, and recently it was Steven’s turn.

“She just wanted to make sure everything’s working like a charm – which it is,” he says.

They’ve also spoken about other devices to help make Steven’s life easier.

“She’s already helped me with a fall detection device on my watch, and down the track I’d like to get a Smart Lock for the door that I use to enter and exit the house, because I struggle with the keys a bit,” he says.

“I feel like my day-to-day life has been really enhanced by these new gizmos and gadgets, and there’s still so much more to discover. And it’s so reassuring that Spinal Life’s AT service covers the whole process from start to finish. Jos has got a lot of knowledge. And the key to improving your life is just to keep asking questions. You’ve got to keep asking, asking, asking.” 

To find out more visit spinalhealthyliving.com.au/brisbane or call 1300 774 625.

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AT home with Jos

Advice from Spinal Life's amazing
Assistive Technology Mentor



“What is assistive technology (AT)? It’s basically any technology – high tech or super simple – that can help someone perform functions that would otherwise be difficult or even impossible,” says Jocelyn Stocker (aka Jos), the Assistive Technology Mentor at Spinal Life Australia.

In the Assistive Technology showroom at the Healthy Living Centre in Woolloongabba, they’ve targeted a very specific area of AT, concentrating on the home.

“It’s all about assisting with home automation in order to create greater independence for people with disabilities,” explains Jos. “What we offer doesn’t just end with a smart switch, a digital deadbolt, a video doorbell and a Google hub. They’re a great introduction to the sorts of ways we can help, but once somebody’s experienced that elementary level of AT and understands how we do things – and that it really does work – that’s when they start going, ‘What’s next?’ And that’s when the conversation gets really exciting and individualised.”

The results of thoughtful and intelligent AT in the home, even really simple solutions, can be profound.

“Having the ability to do things like turn air conditioning on or off, or pull a blind down so that the sun’s not in your eyes sounds so simple, but it’s really life changing,” says Jos.

“It not only gives you independence and autonomy, but it can also have an incredible effect on relationships. Instead of giving your partner or family member a list of 10 things that need to be done the minute they walk in the door, you can instead go, ‘G’day love, how was your day?’. Because you’ve already sorted those 10 things yourself, thanks to AT in the home. It lets people have more real and meaningful relationships, and prevents loved ones from feeling like secondary unpaid carers. There’s no way to measure the change to this dynamic, but we know the effects are immense.”

So what are some AT innovations that can help someone at home? We asked Jos to share just a few:

1. Dragon software

“I think most people are familiar with speech-to-text technology – even if they’re just using the basic version on their mobile phone – but Dragon speech recognition software is on a whole other level. It’s fantastic. I’m probably one of its biggest advocates because I know what a difference it’s made in my own life, as well as so many Spinal Life members. Not everyone can have it or use it, but for those who can it can be the difference between being employable and unemployable. Thanks to this software you can write up to 300 words a minute:



it's a real game-changer and in the 'back-to-work' space it's very attractive to employers.

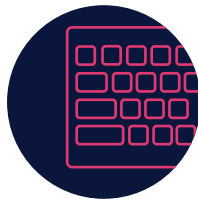
The software has improved out of sight during the 15 years that I've been using it. When I first started I often worked from home, and this strange word used to pop up again and again. We couldn't work out what it was or where it was coming from – it definitely wasn't something I was saying. Eventually we realised it was a crow in my garden... Dragon was picking up its cawing sound and interpreting into some strange word!

A word to the wise: The educational support offered by the Dragon software developer, Nuance, is time very well spent, as you become so much more productive. I was 'self-taught' for a long time before I actually had two hours of tuition. The difference was just incredible. There was a whole raft of tools that I hadn't used or didn't even know existed, and the software could do so much more than I had ever imagined.

A couple of years ago my nephew graduated from university and got a job as an undergrad in a law firm. As the firm no longer employed legal secretaries, every practising lawyer was required to do all of their own notes and correspondence. And so my nephew asked if he could spend a day with me, watching me use Dragon software as he realised nothing was going to be as accurate or productive. He was right – and these days his whole law firm uses Dragon!"

2. Adaptive keyboards

"Computer keyboards come in all kinds of configurations. You've got your generic, standard layout; ones with numbers on one side only or as a separate panel; ones that can be operated using your mouth or a head stick; and split keyboards that are literally cut down the middle so you can place each half wherever is best for your hands – they can be two feet apart if you like! There are so many different options, so you can really tailor them to your specific needs and make the process of using a keyboard less fatiguing."



3. Computer adapted mice

"We've got 28 mice in the AT showroom... but no cheese! Some are larger and have a trackball rather than a wheel. Some are joysticks. Some have programmable buttons in customised formations to specifically complement a person's hand dexterity. Some are simply left-handed rather than right-handed. The point is, you definitely don't have to put up with a traditional mouse, there are so many different options out there."



4. Sixth Digit stylus

"Assistive technology doesn't have to be expensive. There's some great, low-cost stuff that can really make a difference in a person's life and enable them to be more independent. For example, there's a new stylus on the market called the Sixth Digit. You wear it much like a ring, and mounted on the end is a kind of one-inch pencil with a stylus tip. It enables people with reduced hand function to touch screens and press buttons, so it's a big help when using anything from phones, tablets, keyboards and remote controls, to microwaves, ATMs, gaming controllers, washing machines, and screens and SatNavs in cars."




5. Apple Home

"Once upon a time, if you had smart air conditioning you would have an app for it on your phone. If you had smart plugs you'd also have an app for that. In fact, you'd have a different app for every device and smart home accessory. But since Apple introduced its Home app (which was updated and improved in iOS 16.4 earlier this year), you can unify everything in this one app. It just makes things simpler and easier – which is the whole point of assistive technology. Unfortunately they've yet to release something similar for Android phones, but it's surely only a matter of time."



6. Installation advice

"Like all technology, AT is great when it's working, but a nightmare if it's not. Having help to get set up initially, and a backup plan if things go wrong at any stage later on, is essential. The beauty of our service is that if you live in Brisbane and you need something set up or something fixed, we can get things sorted within a really reasonable timeframe. It's very reassuring for members and gives them real peace of mind. Maybe an app's not working, or something needs to be mounted on a wall. It might only need two little screws, but for someone with a high-level disability that can be mission impossible. That's when you need Tommy Tustin, our IT guy. He handles all AT jobs at our clients' homes, and is such a nice bloke. Everyone just loves Tommy!" 



Spinal Life's AT showroom now has a display of adaptive clothing from Push Mobility and Kinetic Balance, with sample sizes available of products including jeans, jackets and rainwear. To find out more visit spinalhealthyliving.com.au/brisbane or call 1300 774 625.



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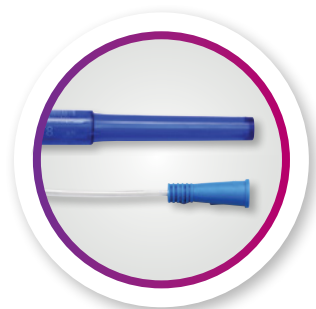
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Life's a beach

The hunt for the perfect beach experience

Our intrepid Spinal Life Advocacy Officer, Karen Harvey, has been on the case again, this time reviewing beaches and beach wheelchairs in Perth.

Karen undertook the review on behalf of the City of Wanneroo, and visited five beaches, including Cottesloe, Mullaloo, Ngarkal, Quinns Rocks and South Beach in South Fremantle.

Each destination offered a different beach wheelchair, so Karen was able to trial five different models: the Hippocampe All-Terrain Chair, Mobi-Chair Floating Beach Wheelchair, Sandcruiser, Sand Rider, and the Surf N Turf Beach & Bush Wheelchair.

Karen, who also led a team of volunteers to do an accessibility audit of Mandurah beaches, assessed things like the usability of each model; what it was like to transfer from an existing wheelchair onto the beach wheelchair; how they performed on sand versus beach matting; and how easy it was to turn, reverse and change direction.

The results varied wildly. And there were many other things to consider as well.

"It's definitely not just about the beach wheelchair itself," says Karen.

"You have to consider the booking process, and what it's like to gain access to each beach wheelchair (and then

return it), and how easy it is to transfer onto the chair – some of them have huge wheels that make things very difficult."

One location in particular was overly difficult and time-consuming when it came to access.

"After parking and getting in my wheelchair I went to the beach wheelchair storage area, but it was locked. So then I had to wheel about 100 metres down an incline and shout out to the lifesaver (who was about another 20 metres away and obviously looking at the beach, not in my direction), to say, 'Hey, excuse me, I need the key for the room!' And then I had to go 100 metres back up the incline to the storage area until I could finally get the chair."

Storage in some places was also an issue: "At one location, there was ample storage for beach wheelchairs, but it wasn't maintained and there were spiders and cobwebs *everywhere* and it was a real safety issue," she recalls.

A beach's topography can also play a major part in access and functionality – and not just for a beach wheelchair.

"You also have to consider the gradient of the path from your car to *get* to the beach wheelchair," she explains. "And then once you've transferred you have to get down to the beach itself. If it's too steep, it's going to be hard to push the chair back up. And then there's the question of

how a beach wheelchair works on sand. I tried one that was really awesome in the water, but it took four people to get it back up on to soft sand!"

And of course there are the other facilities to consider.

"One beach I surveyed had beach matting, but no path to the matting, so you had to wheel over a grassy area to get there. But at least they had matting: other places had none at all," says Karen.

"Ultimately, it's not just about the type of beach wheelchair on offer. It goes beyond that," she explains. "So many different things need to be in place, from the car park onwards. It's about the entire beach experience."

After completing her seaside studies Karen was able to advise on ways to make experiences at these beaches more user-friendly for people requiring beach wheelchairs. For example: introducing codes that can be sent via text message so it's easy to access the chairs in the first place.

"My feedback was received very positively, and the 'spider' beach has already added fumigation every six months to their maintenance schedule!" she says.



In a Mobi-Chair Floating Beach Wheelchair at South Beach in Fremantle, with Spinal Life team member Mary Kerr.

"It's all about removing barriers and making it possible for people to have an independent experience and not be reliant upon others," says Karen. "Because that's what we want. We don't want a big fuss and kerfuffle. We just want to be able to go to a beach, access and hop onto a chair easily, get to the water, have some fun, and then put the chair away just as easily before we head home. By getting rid of these barriers it just brings us closer to that independent experience." [A](#)

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Katrina with Dane
Cross from Spinal Life
Australia's Advocacy
team – and a friend!

Down on the farm

Working with Spinal Life was a game-changer for White Ridge Farm

Head just a few minutes out of Caboolture and you'll come across White Ridge Farm. It's a place where you can take the kids to ride a train, go on a tractor ride, play putt putt golf – and of course hang out with the animals, which include llamas, alpacas, goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, horses, and even a camel.

The lovely farm is owned and run by Katrina and David White, who have been at their current site in the Moreton Bay region for nine years.

"We run an education program, so during the week we have groups coming from schools all around the area. We also have families, kindy groups and nursing home residents come and visit, and we do birthday parties. So our audience is broad, and because we like to include everybody, it's important to us to make it possible for people with all sorts of mobilities to be able to visit," she says.

The farm is not only hugely welcoming to visitors with disabilities, it also employs people with disabilities among its team of nearly 20.

With 2023 being the Year of Accessible Tourism in Queensland, Katrina and David decided to *really* focus on accessibility and inclusion at the farm.

"There's no rocket science in this for us," says Katrina. "It's about inclusivity for *everybody*... and not everybody is the same. We wanted to learn everything we could from experts and industry leaders in the field of accessibility and disability inclusion."

And so they met with Spinal Life's Advocacy team, who were able to provide valuable, first-hand advice about being a customer or employee with a disability, as well as how to improve accessibility at the farm.



Hump day at White Ridge Farm.

This included taking part in a Realistic Race, which is a unique training workshop that allows participants to have just a small glimpse into the challenges faced by people with disability, by completing tasks using a range of mobility aids and equipment.

“Until we did the Realistic Race we thought we were so accessible, but it was very very eye-opening and we quickly realised we had improvements to make,” says Katrina.

White Ridge Farm has now implemented a number of changes, including building a fully accessible car park and putting bitumen pathways all the way around the farm, to help make things easier for people with prams, wheelie walkers and wheelchairs.

“We’re also in the process of building a complete new entrance to the farm, based around accessibility and inclusiveness,” she says. “We already have a ramp but after doing the program we realised it wasn’t quite good enough. So we’re redoing that, and building a new ticket box that features a low counter to be more inclusive for people in wheelchairs.”

They’re also on the case to improve their hiring processes and policies, to better support employees with a disability.

“We’ll apply the knowledge we gained to create an inclusive and accessible work environment, and make sure our hiring processes, policies and workplace accommodations are designed to support employees with disabilities.”

They also plan to continue educating their staff on disability awareness and inclusivity, in order to foster a welcoming and supportive atmosphere at the farm – which, let’s be honest, is already pretty great.

“We really want to take into account the needs, preferences, and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities,” says Katrina, “and create an inclusive experience that goes beyond mere compliance with accessibility standards.”

Spinal Life’s work with White Ridge Farm was provided at no cost as part of the EnABLED Business program, thanks to the Queensland Government through its Growing Workforce Participation Fund. The program has just received funding for the Ipswich region – stay tuned for updates in the next issue of *The Advocate*! [A](#)

White Ridge Farm, located at 130 Hamilton Road, Elimbah, is open from 9am–3pm every Wednesday to Sunday. For more information, go to whiteridgefarm.com.au.



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Nauman Abbasi's beautiful life of service

We love highlighting the amazing people who work at Spinal Life Australia, but our usual Q&A format doesn't work for everyone: for some people you need a few more words to convey their fascinating story. One such person is Nauman Abbasi, 48, a Personal Support Worker based in Cairns.

It's been a big couple of years for Nauman. In 2022 he was named District Polio Chair for his local Rotary club, and he was granted his Australian citizenship on 23 February this year – the same day that Rotary International celebrates its birthday.

Yes, in case you can't tell, Rotary International has played an enormous part in Nauman's life. He became a member in his home country of Pakistan, and then shifted his registration to Dubai when he moved there to work for a construction company.

It was while he was in Dubai that Nauman started chatting online with Susanne Rea in Australia, herself a member of Rotary Cairns Sunrise.

"We met on Facebook in 2013 and chatted online for more than a year before we finally met face-to-face," says Nauman. "Susanne came to Dubai on a speaking tour about the incredible program she founded called the World's Greatest Meal to Help End Polio."

Susanne, who is a member of Spinal Life Australia, contracted polio at the age of four, and has had post-polio syndrome for 30 years, since she was 50.

"Over the years she's had 18 operations on her legs," says Nauman. "She can still walk with a walker and is still very involved as a polio eradication advocate."

But on that first night the couple went for dinner and Nauman discovered that because of Susanne's post-polio syndrome, she always remained in her hotel when she travelled. It was her first time in Dubai, but other than her speaking commitments she had no plans.

"When I heard that, I made plans," he says. "So the next day I picked her up from her hotel and drove her to the Dubai Mall. I hired a wheelchair and took her out for the day – and that was where it all began."

Susanne returned to Dubai for a longer holiday, and again the pair was inseparable.

Nauman and his wife, Susanne, are leading polio eradication advocates.



"She stayed with me and I took her to all sorts of places in the UAE," says Nauman. "She was so happy and after 10 days said, 'I want you to be with me for all my travels. Can you do it?' So I became her travel companion!"

Nauman left his job, but kept his home, and he and Susanne travelled together for two exciting years, using Dubai as their hub, and travelling to places like Seoul for a Rotary International convention and a number of countries in Africa. The couple actually ended up living in Uganda for 10 months, and it was there that their friendship blossomed into love.

"But after thieves broke in to our home and stole everything we decided it was time to move," recalls Nauman. "I said I thought we should live in a country where one of us had citizen rights, so we agreed to make a home in Islamabad, in my home country of Pakistan. We were very happy there, but couldn't always be together, because Susanne's visa meant she had to leave and return every three months."

After her sixth trip out of Pakistan and back again, Susanne revealed that she wanted to give Nauman a gift: she wanted to become Muslim. A surprised but delighted Nauman took her to his home city of Multan, the City of Saints, where she accepted Islam... and their very international love story continued.

After Susanne's seventh trip away, she told Nauman that she could no longer live with him because it did not align with Muslim values.

"She said she should not live with me unless we were married... so that's what we did!" says Nauman.



Their globe-trotting life continued after they were married, until Susanne was diagnosed with bowel cancer. In 2018, after a miraculous recovery, the pair decided it was time to go to Australia.

Since arriving in Australia, Nauman has certainly been busy.

"I have a university degree from Pakistan but it wasn't recognised here in Australia, so I did my Certificate III in Individual Support (Ageing and Disability)," he says. "I then completed my Certificate IV in Disability last year, and will soon be starting a Diploma in Community Services."

In the middle of all of that studying, Nauman also started working for Spinal Life Australia.

"I started working for Spinal Life in September 2020, originally on a casual basis, but I'm now permanent part-time and work more than 60 hours every fortnight," he explains. "Spinal Life is my core company; my star company. I love working with them. I am a Personal Support Worker with two permanent clients, plus I work at the Healthy Living Centre. It's an awesome facility."

"Being a Personal Support Worker is all about serving the clients, which I love. I love to become a trusted, calm presence in someone's home, and to listen properly to what they want. Making a difference in their life, that's the best feeling. It's a really rewarding career," he says.

"Australia has given me a new life. Not long after I arrived I experienced chest pains and was sent to the Cairns Base hospital for an angiogram. Four days later the Royal Flying Doctors flew me to Townsville for triple bypass surgery. So Australia has given me a new life in more ways than one. I'm so happy and grateful to be here."



On a recent visit to Pakistan, Nauman was able to help out at a polio immunisation clinic.

And finally, of course, there's Nauman's work with Rotary International.

He became a member of the Rotary Club of Cairns Sunrise when he moved to Australia, and was last year made the District Polio Chair.

Nauman and Susanne now run the #WGMeal Global Project (www.wgmeal.org), which has raised more than US\$14 million so far, and helped immunise millions of children.

"We have also developed a school in Pakistan," says the tireless Nauman. "It all started when we visited for an immunisation activity and realised that there was no furniture for the 200 students."

They sorted out furniture, and then ramped up fundraising for the school so that it now boasts more classrooms (with windows and fans), more washrooms, and a grant has just been approved for a solar system.

"We are very happy doing this good work," says Nauman, who visited the school again recently to check out the improvements that have been made thanks to Rotary Club donations. "I have seen that Australia has community-based values and I am so happy to be a part of the community. It's a beautiful country and a wonderful chance in my life that I ended up here. I am very proud and happy to do my best." [A](#)

October is Polio Awareness Month, with World Polio Day taking place on 24 October. For more information, go to www.endpolio.org/world-polio-day

The latest

Information, inspiration and inclusivity



CHANGES TO SPINAL LIFE'S BOARD

As a member-based, member-led organisation, Spinal Life Australia is dedicated to providing support and advocacy for people with spinal cord damage and other physical disabilities.

To help us achieve this goal, our Board comprises a majority of Directors with lived experience of disability, who can directly relate to the issues our members face every day and call on this first-hand knowledge in their decision making.

In addition, the Board must have the right mix of skills and experience needed to run large and complex business operations, so Spinal Life can continue to provide the best possible services today, while also focusing on ways we can grow into the future. There have been some changes to the Board recently, so we wanted to share a quick update with you.

Farewell to Mark Dillman

After more than 15 years on the Board, Director Mark Dillman (*pictured top left*) recently made the decision to step down. Mark's legal expertise and experience has been invaluable over his tenure with the organisation, guiding our strategy and advising on key governance issues.

We thank Mark for volunteering so much of his time over the years to support the Board, and for his tireless dedication to making a difference in the lives of our members and community.

Looking to the future

Following an update to our Constitution voted on by members at last year's Annual General Meeting (AGM), Spinal Life's Board can now appoint a select number of Directors, based on their high-level business skills and experience.

At our August Board meeting, the Board approved the following three-year terms:

- Gerard O'Brien, first elected in May 2019, whose business skills have proven invaluable in guiding our business strategy and helping us in making good business decisions on our investments and operations;
- Michelle Wilson, first elected in May 2019, a chartered accountant and tax specialist who has been instrumental ensuring that Spinal Life Australia is run on a sound financial basis and makes the right, risk-weighted investment decisions;
- Cathy Russo (*pictured top right*), a highly regarded corporate lawyer,

who joins us to fill Mark Dillman's very large shoes and ensure that we continue to fulfil our legal and regulatory obligations as we build to the future.

Members will continue to vote on vacancies as part of the Annual General Meeting (AGM) when these arise within our Elected Directors, who all have lived experience and make up the majority of the Board.

Save the Date for our AGM!

This year's AGM will be held on Thursday 23 November 2023 at 11am (AEST) at our head office in Woolloongabba and via an online platform facilitated by Link Market Services, which can be accessed from a computer, smartphone or tablet.

We'll be sending out further details in late October, including meeting information and voting instructions. If you're a Spinal Life member, keep an eye on your email or letterbox for more. [A](#)

You can also visit spinal.com.au for AGM updates.



FIND AN EVENT IN YOUR REGION

Our Peer Support Catch-Ups are held regularly across Queensland, and are a great opportunity to connect with others, share information and advice, and hear about Spinal Life's latest advocacy initiatives.

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0473 576 107 or Anne Guthrie; 0407 116 035

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CAIRNS: Joy Hay; 4055 5795

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or Joan Radanovic; 0413 178 073

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Shooting for the stars

Joel's quest for archery success

Keen archer Joel Fernandes has set his sights firmly on the Los Angeles Paralympics in 2028.

Joel, 43, grew up in East Timor and experienced first-hand the accessibility challenges in the country when he sustained paraplegia in a car accident in 2006.

He was forced to leave hospital after only a month due to the civil war that was happening at the time, before living at home without a wheelchair for more than two years, with no access to rehabilitation or specialists.

It wasn't until two speakers visited from not-for-profit Motivation Australia that Joel gained independence, as he was finally able to access a wheelchair and learn valuable skills to manoeuvre and transfer in and out of bed, cars and more.

"After that, I started work with the Leprosy Mission to help people with disabilities to also become more independent and use a wheelchair," Joel says.

Through the Leprosy Mission, Joel met his now-wife Helen, who was based at the Melbourne office and first visited the East Timor branch in 2010.

In 2013, after a long-distance relationship which meant they only saw each other a couple of times each year, Joel and Helen got married and he made the permanent move to Australia.

The couple relocated from Melbourne to Brisbane in 2019 to be closer to family – only a few months prior to the start of the COVID pandemic – before Joel joined Spinal Life's Advocacy team last year.

Joel's interest in archery began in 2021 when he attended a 'come and try' day at the Belmont Shooting Complex, which offers accessible facilities and inclusive sports.

Initially, he tried air pistol shooting but quickly switched his focus to archery, and now trains up to two times per week, for three to four hours each time.

"I like that it has lots of technique and feels very satisfying when you hit the gold [centre] of the target – I can now shoot from 70 metres," he says.

Joel uses a leather support that's attached to his wheelchair to help him keep his balance, however, he says there are many adaptive options for archery.

"For example, some people hold the bow with one hand and use their teeth to pull the string and shoot," he says.

Since he began, Joel has competed in two national tournaments in Melbourne and Brisbane, and will attend another training camp in Sydney this year.

"A few months ago, I also got a scholarship and went to the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra," he says.

"It was a good experience, and I learned a lot of things about archery, like how to control your emotions when you compete, and I also learned lots of techniques from coaches from different states."

Joel is part of the Archery Australia National Pathways Squad (NPS), a program aimed at providing a pathway for athletes wishing to represent Australia at major international events.

"My goal is to compete in international competitions and the LA Paralympic Games in 2028."

As Spinal Life's Inclusion Resource & Information Officer, Joel assists people to access the NDIS. He also works closely with not-for-profit organisation GIVIT to connect people with disability to donated goods, such as refrigerators and washing machines, including if they are moving into a new home after being discharged from hospital.

Joel also plays wheelchair AFL, basketball and rugby, and enjoys fishing in his spare time.

"My advice is you will never know what you are good at until you try something. So, keep trying and never give up." [A](#)

To learn about archery, email members@spinal.com.au to connect with Joel, or visit belmontrange.com.au for more.



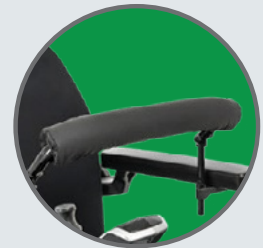
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