

THE Advocate

A VOICE FOR ACCESSIBLE, EQUITABLE AND EMPOWERED LIVES | WINTER 2025 ISSUE

Access. Granted.

Brisbane's Story Bridge just became wheelchair accessible!

An epic road trip

Accessible adventures,
Aussie style

500 referrals!

It's a milestone moment
for Back2Work

From Ukraine to Oz

One woman's
great escape

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Celebrating progress and staying connected

It's hard to believe we're already halfway through the year. Across Spinal Life, it's been a busy time as we prepare for the new financial year – reviewing budgets and making sure we're set up for long-term success, all while staying true to our mission: supporting people with disability to live accessible, equitable and empowered lives.

I'm pleased to welcome you to this issue of *The Advocate*, which is full of moving stories and useful information. From the first fully accessible bridge climb on the planet – now open in Brisbane – to meeting our newest Peer Support Officer in Western Australia, there's something for everyone. You'll find travel reviews, wellness tips from a dietitian, and opportunities to get active through sport and recreation with Sporting Wheelies.

We're also celebrating a significant milestone: our 500th referral to the Back2Work program. Thanks to funding from the Motor Accident Insurance Commission (MAIC), Back2Work helps people who've recently sustained a spinal cord injury begin exploring study or work options while still in hospital

– and continue that support after they return home. Since launching as a pilot in 2016, the program has helped many participants return to work or study in a range of diverse roles, as you can read in the article on page 20.

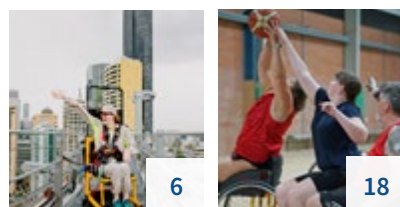
MAIC has been an incredible supporter of this work, and we're also grateful for their role in helping us fund the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre in Cairns – now a vital community hub. The Board recently visited Cairns to connect with members and clients, and we hope to return again soon. Keep an eye on your emails for upcoming visit dates, and check out the review of the Centre from George on page 26.

We've also launched a membership update campaign, asking all Spinal Life members to confirm or update their contact details. Being a member is completely free and gives you access to a wide range of benefits – from being able to vote at our Annual General Meeting, to advocacy and social catch-ups, to your copy of *The Advocate*. You should have already received a letter with a form and a reply-paid envelope, or you can simply scan the QR code on this page to update your details online. Our members are at the heart of everything we do – and staying in touch means we can keep you informed and involved.

As always, I'd love to hear from you. If you have feedback or ideas, please get in touch at **chair@spinal.com.au**. Wishing you all the best for the months ahead – enjoy the read!



Gyl Stacey
GYL STACEY



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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



1. How are changes in NDIS legislation impacting Spinal Life and its clients?

Changes in legislation implemented in October 2024 had immediate negative impacts on our clients and those impacts will continue to be felt in the longer-term. The NDIS will no longer enable participants to use their funding to pay for membership to our Healthy Living Centre fitness hubs, so we are designing new and different approaches to enable people to continue to use these much-needed facilities, in an affordable and sustainable manner.

The other significant change is the introduction of three-month funding periods, which began in May. This will make management of funding more difficult for NDIS participants than ever before and will require all participants to be very aware of their funding levels and what remains in their NDIS budgets. The approach we have repeatedly heard from the NDIS is that if participants run out of funds two months into a three-month plan period, they will be forced to go without funding until the next funding period commences. We will be working hard to minimise disruption to services for customers as these funding periods continue to be implemented.

2. Has the recent announcement of new prices by the NDIS had any impact on Spinal Life?

Yes, there will be some negative impacts of the new Pricing Arrangements and Price Limits announced recently by the NDIS for the 2025-26 Financial Year. The agency has not only maintained some existing prices, with no room for increases in line with inflation – they have actively reduced funding that can be claimed by registered providers of services such as Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Support Coordination and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselling. We have been working hard to understand the impact of these changes on our customers and our organisation and will be continuing to identify ways to manage the loss of revenue caused by the new prices. We'll be communicating with all NDIS customers once the impacts for individuals are fully understood.

3. What's changing in aged care and what does it mean for people with disability?

We're keeping a close eye on the rollout of the Support at Home program, which is part of broader aged care reforms

taking effect from 1 November 2025. This new program will replace the Home Care Packages and Short-Term Restorative Care programs, and will eventually transition the Commonwealth Home Support Programme from July 2027.

Designed in response to the Aged Care Royal Commission, Support at Home aims to simplify and improve access to services, equipment and home modifications. We want to ensure these improvements benefit older Australians with disability who are over 65 and not eligible for the NDIS. Under the previous My Aged Care system, many people with disability did not receive the funding they needed to adequately support their disability-related needs.

4. What's new at Sporting Wheelies as we look towards Brisbane 2032?

Sporting Wheelies has been busy shaping the future of inclusive sport in Queensland. We're proud to be part of the EMPOWER Project – the first official legacy initiative of Brisbane 2032 – aimed at increasing sports participation among people with disability. With \$300,000 in federal funding, we're delivering the Pathways to Inclusion school program to help shift attitudes in 50 Queensland schools. We're also deeply engaged in the development of inclusive infrastructure and strategy around the Games, including the proposed Parasport Centre of Excellence and advocating successfully for para sport representation on the Queensland Academy of Sport Board. Our work spans state-wide consultations, eLearning projects, and driving universal access in the Brisbane 2032 legacy plans.

Looking ahead

We're committed to advocating for meaningful, long-term change – whether through policy, programs or partnerships. We look forward to sharing more updates in future issues of *The Advocate*. As always, I welcome your thoughts at ceo@spinal.com.au so please feel free to reach out.



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What a Story!

The world's first accessible bridge climb has just opened at Brisbane's iconic Story Bridge



A wheelchair user summits Brisbane's iconic bridge thanks to the fully accessible Story Bridge Adventure Climb.

Brisbane has made history by launching the world's first wheelchair-accessible bridge climb atop its historic Story Bridge. Thanks to a custom-engineered stair-climbing wheelchair and a visionary team behind the scenes, people with mobility impairments can now summit one of the city's best-known landmarks for sweeping views and an unforgettable dose of adventure.

It highlights what's possible when the right people come together – when businesses listen, communities are consulted, and people with disability are part of the process. It's not just a climb. It's a shift.

It's a proud moment for Brisbane, cementing the city's reputation as a world leader in inclusive adventure tourism.

And at the heart of it all is one man: tourism pioneer John "Sharpey" Sharpe.

Sharpey first pitched the idea of a bridge climb in the '90s while working at Brisbane City Council. Though it didn't gain traction at the time, he later pursued the concept privately and became a part-owner of the company that launched the original climb.

After years of involvement – including partnering with the Howard Smith Wharves consortium to take full ownership – he has since stepped back. But his influence remains, particularly when it comes to championing accessibility. Over the years, he's driven a wide range of inclusive tourism initiatives, including a lifting wheelchair system developed



The Story Bridge Adventure Climb at a glance

- GROUP SIZE:** Up to nine participants (including one wheelchair user); minimum of four.
- SUPPORT CREW:** At least three companions assist climb leaders by managing a guide rope.
- COST:** \$150 per person (minimum four people, includes one concession).
- DURATION:** 2.5 to 3 hours.
- LOCATION:** Story Bridge Adventure Climb (SBAC) headquarters, Howard Smith Wharves (ramp access from the footpath).
- EXPERIENCE:** The wheelchair uses a motorised caterpillar track to ascend. The guided climb includes stops, commentary, and summit views.

for Vertigo, a one-of-a-kind dining experience where guests are safely harnessed and served a meal while seated on the edge of Brisbane Powerhouse, 17 metres up.

“I’d been lobbying for accessible equipment for years, but the technology just wasn’t there,” says Sharpey. “That all changed when we created the lifting wheelchair for Vertigo. Once I saw how well it worked, I realised we could use the same thinking on the Story Bridge.”

That idea sparked years of development – trialling three different wheelchairs, testing five control systems, and ultimately settling on a customised model originally designed for emergency evacuations.

“Although we needed to heavily modify it, finding that chair was a real breakthrough moment for us,” Sharpey says.

The initiative received a \$250,000 boost from the Queensland Government’s Accessible Tourism Elevate Fund and drew on insights from accessibility experts including wheelchair motocross athlete Tim Lachlan, Mike Box of Box Wheelchairs, and consultants from Spinal Life Australia.

One of those consultants was Dane Cross, a long-time advocate for inclusive tourism and now Chief Operating Officer at Sporting Wheelies. His involvement began several years ago, when Sharpey’s team took part in Spinal Life’s Access Accelerator program and Realistic RACE disability awareness training. >

“We also developed disability action plans for their businesses, and I think it all planted a seed,” says Dane. After initially working on Vertigo, he was the natural choice to consult on the Story Bridge Adventure Climb (SBAC) as well.

“I did a test run of the climb a few weeks before launch, and that helped fine-tune some of the details,” he says.

Dane’s feedback offered the kind of insight that only comes from lived experience, leading to simple but critical changes: adding a plinth to make changing easier, revising sling sizes for the hoist, and adjusting the strapping for greater comfort and stability.

Thanks to those final tweaks – and years of development behind the scenes – the result is a climb experience that’s smooth, safe and unforgettable.

It all begins at SBAC’s headquarters at Howard Smith Wharves, where wheelchair users are welcomed with thoughtfully designed accessibility features including lifts, a hoist, and private changing facilities. After gearing up in a jumpsuit and safety harness, climbers are secured into the custom motorised chair, which uses a caterpillar-style track to make its way up the 535 steps.

Each climb accommodates one wheelchair user, who must be accompanied by at least three support companions (with a maximum group size of eight). The experience takes around 2.5 to 3 hours and includes commentary on the bridge’s history and a summit group photo to mark the magic moment. From the top, climbers are treated to breathtaking 360-degree views of the Brisbane River, city skyline and distant mountains.

It’s a moment that stays with you – and for Dane, it meant more than just the view.

“I used to watch other people doing the Story Bridge Climb and think, well, that’s something I’ll never get to do,” he says. “But here we are. It’s thanks to people like Sharpey, who think big and push boundaries.”

It also felt like a milestone – a powerful sign that real change was happening.

“Personally, it felt like we’d really achieved something through our advocacy,” he continues. “At Spinal Life, we’ve been campaigning for better accessibility in tourism for five years, and this felt like we’d hit a mark. Even if we weren’t directly responsible, we helped influence an industry to create something this exciting and innovative for wheelchair users. It felt really fulfilling.”



For Dr Dinesh Palipana OAM, Queensland’s 2021 Australian of the Year and the first official wheelchair user to complete the climb, the experience was nothing short of transformative.

“To do something I never dreamed would be possible – to get to the top and see Brisbane from that vantage point – was amazing,” he says. “The whole experience was so smooth and thoughtfully designed, and just so empowering.”

Dinesh also sees broader value in what the climb represents – not just as an adventure, but as a symbol of what’s possible. “It helps us get out of our comfort zone, and it sends a powerful message to the world,” he says. “If there are people who can think creatively enough to make climbing the Story Bridge possible for someone like me, then what else is possible? If this is achievable, what’s stopping us from doing more – in employment, education... everything? It’s a statement about inclusion, potential, and what can happen when people think outside the box.”

The reactions from climbers have been nothing short of extraordinary – and no one has felt that more deeply than SBAC Business Manager, Sarah Townsend.

“I’ve cried a lot,” she reflects. “It’s been incredibly rewarding and beautiful to be part of something so meaningful. Everyone who’s gone up has had their own reason for being there, and to see their joy, their excitement, their positivity – it’s life changing. For them, and for me. The feedback has been nothing but positive. It’s amazing.”

Sharpey agrees.

Left: For Dr Dinesh Palipana OAM, reaching the top of the bridge delivered a sense of freedom like no other. This pic: Paralympian Rachael Watson agrees – the view is epic, but the feeling is even better.



“I’ve built zip lines on cruise ships that a million people have experienced,” he says. “But seeing one person in a wheelchair climb the Story Bridge – knowing they genuinely thought it would never be possible – that gives me more satisfaction than anything else I’ve done. It’s the kind of experience that really means something. I think equality is one of my most important values, and this is what that looks like in action.”

The Story Bridge Adventure Climb isn’t just about ticking a box for accessibility – it’s about genuine inclusion.

“Inclusive tourism is about being part of the experience,” says Dane. “It’s not just about access – it’s about participation. You don’t travel just to sit in a hotel room. You come to experience what makes a place special – and climbing the Story Bridge is one of the most unforgettable ways to do that in Brisbane.”

The SBAC team already have more than 30 bookings ready to go, and are just waiting on final paperwork to officially open the climb to the public. In the meantime, they’re looking ahead to what’s next.

Future plans include a massive swing that will launch participants out over the city – with full accessibility, of course.

“The plan is to have lots of different activities on offer, from one side of the bridge to the other,” says Sarah.

In the meantime, a Climb, Stay and Play package is available, combining the accessible climb with luxury accommodation at the nearby Crystalbrook Vincent Hotel, which features a stunning rooftop infinity pool with hoist

access. Another package adds the Vertigo experience at Brisbane Powerhouse into the mix.

Sharpey, meanwhile, is pushing even further. Concepts on the horizon for new accessible adventures in Brisbane include a gyroscope adapted for wheelchairs users, an accessible pontoon for water sports at Enoggera Reservoir, and a winch-and-harness system for a glass-bottom boat at Tangalooma – designed to lift children in wheelchairs for the best view on board.

“We’ve already built the boat – it fits five wheelchairs – but we’re working on something to make visibility even better for kids,” Sharpey explains. “It’s a system to winch them Superman-style over the glass floor, and is going to be spectacular.”

All of this, he says, is part of a broader plan to ensure Brisbane is truly ready for the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games and beyond.

“We’re going to have thousands of visitors coming who need accessible adventures. That’s the future – and we’re building it now.”

For Dinesh, climbing the bridge is something he’ll never forget. “Once upon a time I was lying in a hospital bed, not far from the Story Bridge, looking out through a window and wondering if I would ever be outside again,” he says. “To get to see the world from the top of our city’s bridge was like a dream. I had a blast.” [A](#)

To book, visit storybridgeadventureclimb.com.au/accessible-climb or call 07 3188 9070.

Clockwise from top right: Rollo loves nothing more than being on the water; ready for work at Spinal Life Australia; all set to head off on another adaptive mountain biking adventure.



From pain to purpose

Rollo Craib has faced his demons – and is now helping others find their way forward

Meet Spinal Life's new Perth-based Peer Support Officer, Rollo Craib.


Rollo, 60, took on the position earlier this year, and is loving the opportunity to give back.

"I just really felt I had something to offer people who are living through something similar," he says. Although it would be difficult to find someone who's been through experiences similar to Rollo's.



In 2007, he was 42 and running an agricultural business in Geraldton when he was T-boned by a car while riding his motorbike. The impact left him with catastrophic injuries: multiple broken bones, a burst femoral artery, punctured lung, spinal damage, and more.

After 18 months of gruelling rehabilitation, he became a transfemoral amputee, losing his left leg above the knee when it became clear he'd never walk on it again. "Taking my leg off was my 28th operation – and it nearly killed me," he says.



He returned to work, but years later his spine collapsed and he underwent major neck surgery. Complications followed, including infection, repeated operations and, finally, a massive bleed that crushed his spinal cord. Rollo woke from surgery with quadriplegia.

He spent months in hospital, followed by a year in rehab, slowly adjusting to life with incomplete quadriplegia and little sensation from the jawline down. “I lost my business, my marriage – everything,” he says. “I’ve nearly died six times, and survived three suicide attempts. That black hole is pretty damn deep.”

Now, though, that black hole has given way to purpose, and Rollo is using his story to make a difference.

“Things have had their ups and downs, but this year’s been great and I’m in the best shape I’ve ever been in,” he says.

It’s no coincidence that this turning point aligns with his new role at Spinal Life. Helping others is proving to be as healing for him as it is for those he supports.

Rollo and his fellow Peer Support Officer, Lee Thompson, hold monthly catch-ups in Perth and are available to chat with anyone who reaches out. “The idea is to have a meeting every month with coffee and cake, and just be there to talk,” he says. “We can also do one-on-one sessions at someone’s home – whatever works best.”

The team is also hoping to branch out beyond coffee catch-ups, and create more opportunities for people to engage socially.

“We want to start doing outings and get people involved in different activities,” Rollo says. “It’s about trying new things and helping people reconnect with the community.”

“I just really felt I had something to offer people who are living through something similar.”

Two of the things he’s keen to introduce to other Peer Support Group members are Rollo’s personal passions: adaptive mountain biking and kayaking.

A keen competitor in adaptive mountain biking events, Rollo takes part in races each year at Collie and Dwellingup. “They’re about 28 kilometres long, and the countryside

is absolutely beautiful – though some of the terrain is ferocious,” he says. “Luckily the adaptive bikes are electric assist. You pedal with your hands, and the motor helps get you through the tough spots.”

He also rides regularly at the mountain bike trails in Kalamunda. “It’s a great way to meet people, and I just love being outdoors – that sense of freedom you get when you’re on a bike is unbeatable.”

The same goes for kayaking, which Rollo tries to do every week with a mate. “We head down to Rockingham and do five to ten kilometres in our kayaks,” he says. “Sometimes my grandson Riley, who’s nearly 17 and lives with me, joins us – then we’ll go and grab lunch afterwards. It’s a great way to spend a weekend.”

It’s no surprise Rollo gravitates to the outdoors.


“I’ve always loved being outside. I used to take my family camping on the beaches around Geraldton, and taught my kids to ride fun dirt bikes called Peewee 80s when they were young,” he reflects.

It’s the sense of freedom that comes with movement and being in nature that keeps drawing him back to biking and kayaking. “I don’t like being cooped up inside – mentally, it’s just not good for me,” he says. “Fresh air, open space and being active are really ‘me’. I used to be able to walk a few kilometres with my prosthetic – these days I can’t walk far, but I can still get out and do the things I love.”

Rollo knows he’s fortunate to still be active – and he’s determined to use that to support others.

“I just feel like I’ve got a lot to offer people who are going through it,” he says. “There is life after a spinal injury. You can still do stuff – you just have to find a different way to do it.”

The hardest part, he says, often comes after leaving hospital. “In rehab, you’re surrounded by people in the same boat, and you build strong relationships because everyone’s dealing with spinal cord injury. But once you’re home, it’s different. People stare, avoid you, or just don’t know how to act.”

Rollo made a decision early on: hide away, or live life on his own terms. “I figured I had two choices – become a hermit or say ‘stuff it,’ and just get out there and do what I want to do. So that’s what I did.” 

For more information about Spinal Life’s Peer Support Groups, visit spinal.com.au/peer-support-groups



A new beginning

Elena Romanenko's story is one of resilience, reinvention and purpose

Elena Romanenko, an Advocacy and Access Officer at Spinal Life Australia, has called Brisbane home since 2022, after fleeing Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion of her homeland.

She made the journey with her family – and with her wheelchair. Elena has lived with a spinal cord injury since 2000, when a swimming accident at age 16 shattered two vertebrae in her neck. Doctors warned that surgery could be fatal and initially refused to operate, but her grandmother pushed for the procedure to go ahead.

Surgeons used a piece of Elena's iliac crest (pelvic bone) to reconstruct the damaged area. She spent nine months in hospital on a ventilator, followed by rehabilitation at a spinal centre, where meeting others with similar injuries gave her the hope and drive to rebuild her life.

And that's exactly what she did.

Elena spent two years learning English, then four years at a teacher training university. By 24, she was teaching English to children privately.

She also founded and led an organisation called Another Way, which focused on supporting people with disabilities and improving accessibility in her hometown of Kharkiv.

"I'm not somebody who likes to sit still," she says. "I knew how hard it was to get around the city – no ramps, no accessible entrances, no public transport or assistive tech. I wanted to change that, to help people live active, fulfilling lives on their own terms."

She recalls a particularly ridiculous situation, when she was invited to a roundtable discussion on accessibility held by the City Council – on the third floor of a building with no elevator. "They offered to carry me and my power wheelchair up the stairs! I refused," she says. "I told them it was completely unacceptable to hold an accessibility event in a place that was itself inaccessible."

That incident inspired Elena to launch "Business with Soul" – a project that helped more than 20 restaurants, cafés and clinics install ramps, and brought the first accessible taxis to her city.

"When I realised the City Council wasn't going to help, I took matters into my own hands," she says. "I'd visit venues, speak to the owners, and explain that people with disabilities want to work, spend money, and go out like everyone else. My approach worked – I was persuasive and they couldn't say no to me!"

Thanks to her efforts, many wheelchair-friendly venues in her city were marked with a special accessibility sign, and she proudly promoted them on her Instagram.

Later, she joined a travel agency and organised Ukraine's first disability-friendly tours, even creating a guide to help people with spinal injuries prepare for travel. Her tours earned glowing reviews and top Google ratings.

During this time Elena also got married, and in 2012 she and her husband Andrew welcomed their son, Rost, into the world.

Life had its highs and lows, but one of the lowest came in 2022, on the first day of the war. Warned their town would be bombed that morning, they packed their lives into two suitcases and fled west, just Andrew, Rost, Elena and her 85-year-old grandmother, Valentina. They didn't know where they were going – only that they needed to find safety.

They spent a week in a small hotel in the Karpaty mountains, glued to the news on TV. Like all Ukrainians, they hoped the war would end quickly with negotiations, and they would be able to return home. The situation, however, only worsened.

"In Ukraine, there were no bomb shelters accessible for people in wheelchairs, and I couldn't risk the lives of people who would help me down the stairs during an air raid," says >



Elena and her husband, Andrew, with Rost.



Elena, Andrew and Rost, with Andrew's parents. Due to visa restrictions, it was the last time they saw Andrew's father before he died a couple of years later.



Elena and her indomitable grandmother, Valentina.

This pic: Elena and Rost share a poignant farewell with her goddaughter and closest friends, just before departing Italy for their new home in Australia. Right: Elena with her stepfather Phil at Rome airport. He and Elena's mother flew all the way from Australia to help organise the family's visas and flights to their new life.



Elena. “A week later, after seeing the devastation in my city, the decision was made – we had to leave Ukraine and seek safety elsewhere in Europe.”

They spent a month in Slovakia and eight months in Italy, but when refugee programs began to wind down, their future became uncertain. Elena’s mother, who had lived in Brisbane for over a decade, urged them to join her. Still hoping to return to Ukraine, they hesitated – but with no end to the war in sight and few options left, they finally agreed.

“We had a happy, stable life in Ukraine,” says Elena. “We didn’t leave because of poverty; we left because of war. Moving to Australia was a huge decision, and we had no idea what to expect – but we didn’t have a choice.”

Australia welcomed Elena with sunshine, jacarandas, and a level of accessibility she’d never known – she could board public transport and navigate the city with ease. Though she missed Ukraine, the war raged on.

In Brisbane, she took on translation work, marketing, and writing about fellow displaced Ukrainians, but felt drawn to the disability sector, where she could help others like herself. At a refugee meeting hosted by Brisbane City Council, she shared her story with disability representatives and asked them to pass on her details.

“I believe only someone who’s lived with a spinal cord injury can truly help others,” says Elena. “I reached out to Spinal

Life, sent my CV to the Executive Manager – Member Services, Ross Duncan, and he invited me for an interview. I was nervous about my English – but I knew I could help.”

On her first day of work, Ross greeted her in Ukrainian. It was such a kind gesture that Elena was moved to tears.

Two years on, in March 2025, she marked her second anniversary as an Advocacy and Access Officer. “I work in paradise,” she says. “I’m surrounded by compassionate people who understand the challenges of starting over. They support me, and I’m so grateful.”

Though ineligible for the NDIS due to her residency status, Elena receives support from the Queensland Government, which covers her support workers, including Spinal Life Personal Support services.

Living in Australia has fulfilled her dream of a warm life by the ocean. In Ukraine, she often stayed indoors in winter – her wheelchair no match for icy, uneven streets. The cold triggered frequent illness due to a narrowed trachea, but since arriving, she’s had three procedures to widen her trachea and is now healthier in the warmer climate.

“I’m forever grateful to live in this beautiful country, where peace and opportunity abound,” she says. **A**

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There and back again

Hitting the road on an accessible Aussie adventure

When Robert Plant went travelling recently he didn't take a zeppelin (that one's for the classic '70s rock fans); instead, he and his wife Marian went on a road trip in a modified Kia Carnival Platinum. Here's his account of their adventure from Brisbane to Tasmania and back again...

Brisbane to Port Macquarie

Our five-week journey began in Brisbane, but we soon crossed into New South Wales, where accessible rest stops made the drive comfortable. We had lunch at The Clog Barn in Coffs Harbour, a Dutch miniature village, before staying at the accessible Wyndham Resort in Port Macquarie. We explored the waterfront and enjoyed a fabulous 90-minute accessible trike ride with Beach to Bush Trike Tours, where a visit to the Koala Hospital, and its moving stories of rescued koalas, was a highlight. In Port Macquarie, don't-miss delicacies included fresh fish and oysters, authentic Italian food at Ricardoes Tomatoes and Strawberries, and crepes at the accessible Pancake Place.

Sydney to Albury

In Sydney, we stayed at The Wyndham Resort, a 20-minute walk from Darling Harbour, where we explored accessible playgrounds and eateries, and caught an a capella performance at the ARA Darling Quarter Theatre. En route to

Melbourne we stopped overnight at Canberra's accessible Vibe Hotel and lunched the following day in Gundagai, the town with the famous Dog on the Tuckerbox Pioneer Monument. The café there was quite accessible. The toilet wasn't. In Albury, our pre-booked accommodation fell through, but we found a last-minute accessible room at the Hovel Tree Inn, which also had an accessible restaurant and was within wheelchair access of the Murray River, which made for a lovely outing.

Glenrowan to Melbourne and beyond

Before Melbourne, we visited the Ned Kelly Museum & Homestead in Glenrowan and enjoyed treats from a bakery. Brand new accessible toilets in the park also got a big thumbs-up. Melbourne is a foodie's paradise, especially Hardware Lane, but be aware that tramlines and bikeways can make hotel parking difficult. A 90-minute drive to the Dandenongs offered stunning views and accessible stops for food.

Phillip Island

A highlight of our trip was visiting Phillip Island to see the penguins. The accessibility here has improved significantly since my last visit, with a boardwalk leading from the café to the beach. The wheelchair-accessible viewing platform offered perfect, unobstructed views of the penguins waddling

from the ocean to their burrows. Café prices were high, but everything, including the toilets and tourist shops, was clean and accessible. It's an easy drive from Melbourne, with plenty of accessible cafés along the way.

The Great Ocean Road

After Melbourne, we drove to Port Campbell. Our accommodation was a bit cramped: it might be okay for a manual chair, but not for a power chair. When booking accommodation in little towns, I suggest ringing ahead and asking about room sizes. The next day we drove along the breathtaking Great Ocean Road to Torquay, visiting the Timboon Railway Shed Distillery for a whisky tasting. There's also a café at the Distillery and, overall, the place was quite accessible, although the toilets were quite tight. The Twelve Apostles lookout was accessible and offered stunning views. Cape Otway Lightstation is worth a stop, but you'll need to be a confident wheelchair user to navigate the difficult terrain. In Torquay, we stopped at the accessible Panache Café & Creperie in Geelong, a must for crepe lovers.

Geelong to Launceston

We caught the *Spirit of Tasmania* to Devonport, departing Geelong at 6:30pm and arriving 12 hours later. We'd booked a cabin, which was small but functional, with an accessible shower and toilet. The crew were very helpful, especially when I accidentally pressed the emergency button. There's a bar and restaurant onboard, but you can only go through the buffet once without paying again, so load up that plate! The journey over was calm, but the return was rough. Despite this, I'd take the trip again. Driving from Devonport to Launceston, we stopped in Sheffield, famous for its murals, and Railton, known for its intricate topiaries. In Launceston, we explored the town, including City Park with its family of macaque monkeys, and sampled cheeses at Ashgrove Cheese. The Beaconsfield Mine's accessible Heritage Centre offered a haunting glimpse into the past, while country roads led to tempting stops at wineries, distilleries and dairies – some more accessible than others. Three of Tasmania's National Parks are accessible and well worth a visit: don't miss Russell Falls at Mount Field, Cape Tourville at Freycinet, and Cradle Mountain Rainforest Walk.

Hobart

In Hobart, the Salamanca markets feature Tasmanian products like wines, ciders, seafood and woollen products. They close early, so arriving by 7am is recommended, and be aware that accessing the markets in a wheelchair could involve navigating a very steep lane! Hobart is a mix of old and new buildings, though accessibility can be limited. We stayed at the Wyndham Seven Mile Beach Resort, which also offers an accessible forest walk. Mt Wellington, the towering peak behind Hobart, provides stunning views, but the narrow road to the summit demands careful driving. Don't miss nearby wineries, distilleries, the Bonorong Wildlife



One of the many scenic stops along the way: Cape Otway Lightstation in Victoria



Robert and Marian on an accessible trike ride in Port Macquarie with Beach to Bush Trike Tours.

Sanctuary, and a ferry day trip to Bruny Island for local whiskies, mead and the best oysters I've ever tasted.

Ballarat and Beyond

Back on the mainland, we explored Ballarat, a historic town with deep gutters and tricky footpaths, though accessibility improvements are underway. We stayed in a spacious, accessible suite in an old orphanage that had been converted into a hotel. Sovereign Hill, a historic mining village and highlight of the trip, was surprisingly accessible – with manageable paths, accessible toilets, and an easy-to-navigate luncheon hall. The final leg of our journey took us to Lakes Entrance, and then on to Shoal Bay and Coffs Harbour in New South Wales. They were perfect spots to relax before we arrived back in Brisbane. After 36 nights and 6,200 kilometres, we were happy to be home! **A**

Watch Spinal Life's 'Takeaways' video series for more travel tips. Visit spinal.com.au/takeaways or scan the QR code to watch.





Making her shot

Siobhan Harris is using basketball to build her strength, confidence and social connection

When Siobhan Harris, 21, visited an expo in 2024, she never expected it would result in a new passion.

“Almost exactly a year ago I went to a Disability Expo in Brisbane, where the Sporting Wheelies exhibit caught my attention,” she says. “As soon I saw a sports wheelchair I said, ‘I want to do whatever sport you use this chair for!’”

That sport was wheelchair basketball, and the following week Siobhan turned up for her first ever session... at the wrong time.

“Instead of arriving for the beginner’s session, I arrived just as they were just starting the A-level game, which is really competitive,” she recalls. “They threw me in at the deep end – honestly, I didn’t even know the rules! But someone showed me the ropes, and pretty quickly I was thinking, this is great, I love this.”

There’s wheelchair basketball every Tuesday at the Sporting Wheelies gym in Milton, and Siobhan has been to just about every session since her first game.

“It’s just so fun,” she says. “I love being in the chair – it feels awesome, and you can really spin. I played a little bit of basketball when I was at school, but I used to hate team sports back then, and apart from a few people, nobody wanted to be there. It’s so much nicer to be on a team where everyone actually *wants* to be there. I play with young teenagers right up to people in their 50s and 60s. They’re all really supportive and help me learn, and it’s just nice to be there socially as well.”

The social element is especially important for someone whose world can feel pretty limited at times.

“The only time I leave the house is for Sporting Wheelies and medical appointments – which average two or three a week,” she says. “Apart from that, I pretty much stay at home, usually in bed because I’m so tired. On good days I’ll read, spend time with my dogs, maybe watch TV, but if I’ve had a lot of seizures, I can’t do much.”

The dogs she mentions – Myla and Moseley – are much-loved members of the family. The seizures, meanwhile, are part of her daily reality with Functional Neurological Disorder (FND), a kind of short-circuit between the brain and body that disrupts normal function.

“Basically, my brain is structurally fine, but the signals go wrong,” she says. “It’s caused all sorts of issues – chronic

fatigue, constant chest pain, tics, and non-epileptic seizures. I have at least one seizure a day, but on really bad days I'll have multiple, one after the other. I also struggle with short-term memory loss and constant brain fog. And I can't put any weight on my legs, so I've been using a wheelchair for just over a year now."

It took almost two years to get Siobhan's FND diagnosed. "It takes a long time to see a neurologist, especially at my age," she explains. "I'm too old for the children's system, too young for the adult one. I'm just sort of at a limbo age."

On top of that, because there's no one-size-fits-all approach, FND can be challenging to treat. "Ultimately, you have to learn how to manage it, and hope that it goes away," says Siobhan.

Thankfully, she says, in many cases it *does* go away... eventually.

"Some people have symptoms for months, others for years," she says. "There's a chance I could wake up tomorrow and it could be completely gone. But it's also possible I'll be stuck with this for a long, long time – maybe decades. It's impossible to tell.

The exact cause of FND remains unclear. "It's thought to be linked to things like childhood trauma, mental health and neurodiversity, but the causes aren't fully understood," says Siobhan.

Her own childhood trauma stems from her other major health condition, hypopituitarism – a rare disorder where the pituitary gland is either absent or fails to function properly, affecting the body's ability to produce vital hormones.

"I've had hypopituitarism since birth," she explains. "So from the start there were a lot of medical emergencies, and I was in and out of ambulances and hospitals, not breathing properly, not eating, not growing. That was my childhood trauma – and potentially the cause of my FND."

With such a complex medical history, it's taken a long time for Siobhan to come to terms with not having answers about her future. "Eventually, I just had to focus on what I *could* do," she says. "You learn to pick a symptom, work on that, and hope to see some improvement."

And things *are* improving.

"I'm learning to walk again with crutches, and I'm definitely getting stronger," she says. "I used to only be able to stand for a couple of seconds – now I can stand for two minutes, and even walk a little."



That progress is supported by Siobhan's weekly basketball sessions at Sporting Wheelies.

"Basketball is a great workout, and I need that," she says. "It builds my strength and gets me out of the house. My Dad or brother usually take me, and if we're short on numbers they'll sometimes get in a chair and play with us, along with other family members and support workers. Everyone's welcome to play."

These days, it's not just basketball getting Siobhan out of the house. She was one of the first people to join Sporting Wheelies' adaptive swimming program, and every Saturday morning you'll find her enjoying a one-on-one session in the indoor pool at QUT Gardens Point.

"Swimming was always *my* thing – I'm known as the fish of the family," she says. "Apparently I used to jump into the pool before I could even swim, and people would have to rescue me! Nothing's changed, and I still love being in the water. Swimming is a great way to exercise, and I can also walk in the pool because the water supports my weight."

Just like basketball, Siobhan's swimming sessions offer a mix of exercise and social connection – and both are helping her to build strength and confidence. So, the big question is: which sport does she love more?

It's a tough one. For Siobhan, it's actually easier to say which dog is her favourite.

"I love them both, but Myla's my favourite," she laughs. "Moseley's beautiful and the snuggliest dog ever, but I've been in a wheelchair for over a year now, and he barks at it every time I move. He's a nightmare! But when it comes to basketball or swimming, I can't choose – I love them both." **A**

To sign up or find out more, visit sportingwheelies.org.au/sports or call 07 3253 3333.

500 reasons to celebrate

Spinal Life's incredible Back2Work program has just celebrated a huge milestone



From cattle station hands to mechanics and early childhood educators, people with spinal cord injuries are proving that returning to work is possible – with the right support.

One such avenue of support is Spinal Life Australia's Back2Work program, which recently reached a major milestone: its 500th referral.

Thanks to funding from the Motor Accident Insurance Commission (MAIC), the program helps newly injured

individuals explore work or study options – beginning during hospital rehabilitation and continuing once they return home. The service is free, voluntary, and focused on building confidence and direction during a life-changing time.

Launched as a pilot at Brisbane's Princess Alexandra Hospital in 2016, Back2Work has achieved outstanding results: more than 150 people have returned to paid work within 12 months of discharge, with employment rates reaching 62% at four years – double the national average.

"At MAIC, with road trauma remaining a leading cause of spinal cord injury we've seen firsthand how critical employment is to our claimants' recovery after a life-changing injury," says MAIC's Insurance Commissioner Neil

Singleton. "Programs like Back2Work are transformational – not just for individuals, but also for their families, communities and the broader economy.

"We are proud that our ongoing collaboration has seen the program flourish from an initial pilot concept to where it is today."

“We offer support that recognises the whole person – not just their injury. That spark of hope can change everything.”

The program's success is grounded in early, tailored intervention. "Early, specialised intervention is so important. Back2Work starts the conversation

at a time when people feel uncertain about their futures," says Spinal Life's Senior Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor, Tania Goossen. "We offer support that recognises the whole person – not just their injury. That spark of hope can change everything."

Support is also available to employers, helping them understand role adjustments and workplace modifications. Research shows that returning to work improves health, reduces depression and hospital readmissions, decreases overall costs to the health system, and can free up informal carers to re-engage in the workforce.

For people with spinal cord injuries, employment isn't just a pay cheque – it's a powerful step forward.

This pic: Back2Work's Senior Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor, Tania Goossen at work with Spinal Life client Chris McGrady. Right: Evan Stephens at his new job with Black & White Cabs in Townsville.



Workplace win

One person to have recently received support from Spinal Life's Back2Work program after a spinal cord injury is Evan Stephens, 48, from Townsville.

In 2020, Evan was at a friend's house when a jelly shot went down the wrong way. "I was choking, and a mate did the Heimlich manoeuvre," he says. "It saved my life... but it also injured my back."

He continued working and managed well – until April 2024, when simply standing up from the couch aggravated the existing injury. Getting help, however, wasn't easy.

"It took me a month to be admitted to hospital," he says. "The emergency department sent me home twice, saying it was a chronic injury. I should have used 'Ryan's Rule' and asked for a second opinion. They finally admitted me on my third visit, found the problem with an MRI, and operated a week later."

He spent three months in the rehabilitation unit at Townsville University Hospital.

Evan now lives with a spinal cord injury at the T10 level, classified as ASIA D – meaning it's incomplete and he retains some movement and sensation below the injury. The trauma affected three vertebrae, and scans later revealed anterolisthesis (vertebral slippage) and spinal stenosis – a narrowing of the spinal canal causing pressure on his spinal cord.

"I've got altered sensation in my legs – not a total loss, but it's not normal," he says. "I really struggle to walk. I use a wheelie walker most of the time, and occasionally a manual wheelchair. It took me the full three months in rehab to get strong enough to use the walker."

Evan had been in a full-time, permanent customer service role for two years prior to his injury, and so he had a job to return to – but unfortunately, not a supportive employer.

"No one from work called, visited, or even sent a get well card the whole time I was in rehab," he says. "I'm still bitter about it."

Fortunately, a hospital social worker connected him with Brody Kleinschafer from Spinal Life's Back2Work program, who began supporting Evan via telehealth.

They tried to engage with Evan's employer from June, but the company refused to respond. After three months on leave without pay, Evan was issued a Show Cause notice – a formal request to justify why he should keep his job.

"I had to prove I was still fit to work," he says. "Until that point, they hadn't engaged at all. And after that, they just made it harder."

With Brody's ongoing support, Evan began applying for new roles – and quickly received three offers. He accepted a job at Black & White Cabs in Townsville, working in their call centre.

"It's a job I've done before, for a different taxi company," he says. "And the funny part is, I got it through the same group of friends I was with the night of the accident. I now work with the guy who gave me the Heimlich!"

Brody also worked with Evan's new employer to ensure the right support was in place. "He spoke with HR about what to expect, how to make reasonable adjustments, and what funding was available," says Evan.

Black & White Cabs applied for funding through the Employment Assistance Fund, a Federal Government scheme that supports people with disability in the workplace.

"They organised a weight-rated chair for me – a couple of grand's worth – and it's all been approved and sorted thanks to Brody and the company," Evan says.

The match has been so successful that Brody recently met with the company's Brisbane office, who are now considering taking on more Back2Work participants based on Evan's success. [A](#)

Spinal Life's Back2Work project is offered to newly injured patients while they're in the Spinal Injuries Unit at the Princess Alexandra Hospital and other select hospitals. For more information, go to spinal.com.au/back2work

Stageside at The Station: where live music meets true inclusion. Photo courtesy Aaron Parry.

Access all areas

The Sunshine Coast venue setting the standard for accessible live music

While live music venues around the country are closing their doors, one Sunshine Coast newcomer is not just surviving – it's thriving. At a time when the industry is grappling with skyrocketing costs, inconsistent crowds, and a long post-pandemic recovery, The Station is carving out a future built on accessibility, community connection, and good old-fashioned hospitality.

Opened just over a year ago, The Station has quickly become a local favourite, regularly selling out shows and building a reputation for offering unforgettable nights out. From the start, co-owner Chris Hignett and his team were clear about their mission: to create a venue that felt like home.

"We've worked really hard to build a place where people can come together – to see a band, catch up with friends, or just enjoy a night out," says Chris. "It's a welcoming space, and it's been amazing to see the community embrace what we're trying to do."

That sense of community is more than lip service. From the beginning, accessibility has been a central part of The Station's design and philosophy – and the venue was recently recognised for its efforts, winning Accessible Venue of the Year at the Sunshine Coast Music Awards.

Chris is proud of the accolade, but clear about the intent behind it. "It's not about ticking boxes – it's just about doing what's right. Everyone deserves to experience live music without barriers."

Of course, the venue includes the expected physical infrastructure – ramps, accessible bathrooms, and designated parking. But what sets The Station apart is its thoughtful

approach to invisible accessibility – the kind that happens before anyone even walks through the doors.

The team partnered with accessibility platform Cérge, which allows patrons to preview the space virtually, then communicate their needs ahead of time – whether that's noting a preferred entrance, sharing accessibility concerns, or simply letting staff know their estimated arrival time. Before the venue even opened, staff from Spinal Life were invited to tour the space and offer feedback. Team members also underwent training to better understand the experience of people with access needs.

"It's something we take seriously," says Chris. "There's always more work to do, but we're committed to making The Station a place where everyone feels welcome."

That ethos – creating meaningful experiences for *everyone* – may be one reason the venue is holding steady while so many others are struggling.

Chris doesn't deny the challenges. "Costs are up, crowds can be unpredictable, and then there's the crazy weather," he says. "But we've always believed that if we deliver great experiences – consistently – people will keep coming back."

It helps that The Station is independent, family-owned venue that's deeply embedded in the local community. There are no big investors or corporate structures – just a passionate team, a flexible space, and a lot of heart.

That flexibility has allowed The Station to experiment with everything from all-ages gigs to themed events and genre-spanning shows. "We want people to leave saying they had an amazing time – whether they came for a metal gig, a local acoustic set, or just a burger from our bar bites menu."

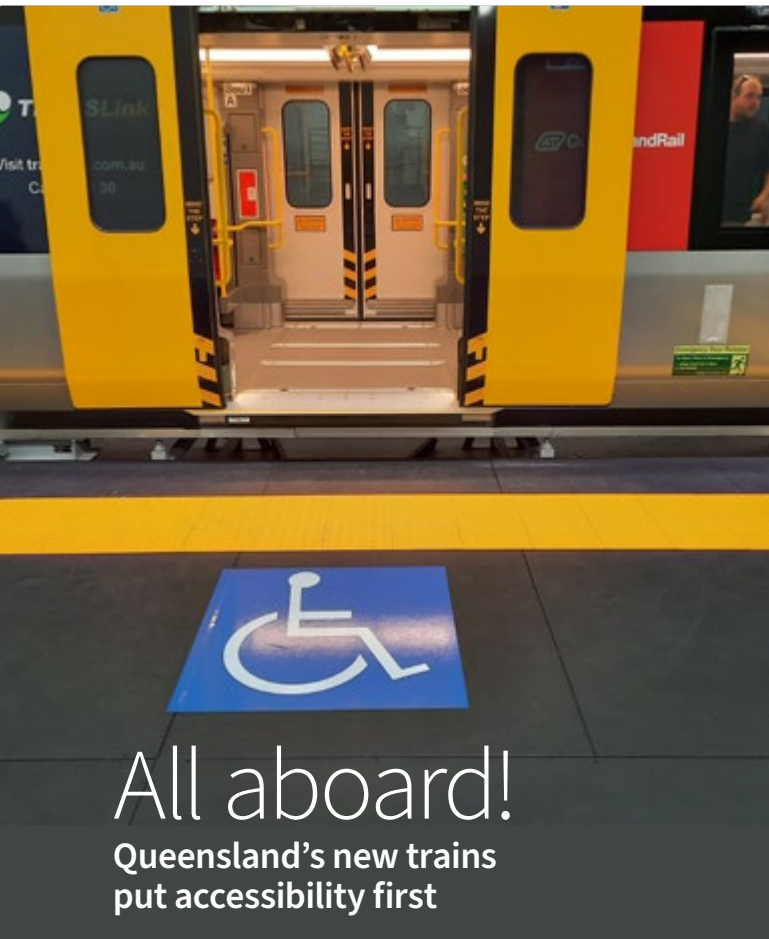
One standout feature is the venue's commitment to all-ages shows, which are surprisingly rare in the current music landscape. "It helps build a strong music culture – and the next generation of gig-goers," says Chris.

That inclusive, future-focused mindset flows through everything they do, and shapes their approach to accessibility. It's not just the right thing – it's smart business.

"It's not hard to make people feel seen and supported," says Chris. "It just takes a bit of thought and willingness to listen."

In an industry battling burnout and closure, The Station is a hopeful exception – a live music venue that puts people first, and proves that accessibility isn't just an add-on. It's part of the reason they're still standing – and thriving. [A](#)

The Station is located at 201/8 The Avenue, Birtinya.
For more details, go to: thestationsc.com.au



Using public transport can be a real challenge for people with mobility issues. Take train travel, for example: navigating the gap between platform and carriage, or finding accessible seating, are just some of the obstacles passengers can face. But that's about to change in a big way.

Queensland is building a whole new generation of trains – 65 in total – and they're being designed with accessibility at the heart of every decision. Thanks to a groundbreaking co-design process that included disability advocates like Spinal Life, these new six-car trains will be the most inclusive and user-friendly that Queensland has ever seen.

It all began four years ago, when a customer reference group sat down with the TransLink project team and Downer Engineering (the company responsible for building



the trains). Their mission? To design the most accessible, inclusive trains in Queensland.

That collaborative approach has already paid off. One of the standout features is a clever step plate that extends from under the train to bridge the gap between the platform and the carriage floor – a game changer for wheelchair users, people with prams, or anyone with mobility needs. The trains will also have height-adjustable carriages to accommodate the varying platform levels across the 160 stations in the South East Queensland rail network, and the allocated spaces will be 1500 x 800mm, not the standard 1300 x 800mm.

And this isn't just a nice idea on paper. A full-scale, high-fidelity mock-up of the train has been built and every detail – from the seating layout to the bathrooms, grab rails, lighting and signage – is being reviewed and refined to ensure it meets universal design principles and delivers an accessible, inclusive service. The goal? A transport experience that works better for everyone.

The new trains will run on Queensland Rail's Sector 1 line – a vital spine stretching from the Gold Coast in the south, through Brisbane, and all the way to the Sunshine Coast in the north. They'll support the region's growing population and play a key role in major projects like Cross River Rail and the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

But most importantly, they represent a shift in how we think about public transport. Accessibility isn't an add-on – it's built in from the beginning. And when that happens, everyone benefits. [A](#)

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Gut feeling

How diet and hydration can support bowel health for neurological conditions



Dietitian Natalie Thompson

Bowel health may not be everyone's favourite topic of conversation, but for people living with neurological conditions, it's an everyday reality. Spinal cord injuries, MS, cerebral palsy, post-polio syndrome and stroke can all disrupt the way the gut works, leading to constipation, diarrhoea, bloating and discomfort. The good news? What you eat (and drink) can make a difference. When gut signals go haywire, a smart nutrition and hydration plan can help keep things moving and make sure nutrition is working for your gut, not against it.

Natalie Thompson (MNutrDiet, BHumNutr, APD, CEDC, Acc SD) is passionate about using food as a tool for better health and combines practical advice with a down-to-earth approach. We asked her to share her expert insights into the link between good nutrition, hydration and bowel health, particularly for people living with neurological conditions.

Natalie's key nutritional considerations for bowel health:

1. Fibre

Fibre plays a key role in keeping things moving. It adds bulk and softness to stools, making them easier to pass. While the general recommendation for healthy adults is 25–30g per day, people with neurological conditions may need more – or less – depending on their individual situation. Increasing fibre too quickly can lead to bloating or discomfort, so it's best to go slow and get advice from a dietitian who understands your needs.

Three key types of fibre:

- **Insoluble fibre** – found in whole grains, nuts, seeds, and the skin of fruits and vegetables. It adds bulk and helps move waste through the gut.
- **Soluble fibre** – found in oats, lentils, flaxseeds, psyllium, and many fruits and vegetables. It absorbs water, creating a gel-like texture which can soften stools and support bowel regularity.

- **Resistant starch** – found in cooled rice and potatoes, and legumes. It feeds your good gut bacteria and supports healthy bowel function.

2. Hydration

Water keeps everything flowing – literally. It softens stools, helps them move through the gut, and prevents constipation. But for people with neurological conditions, reduced thirst signals or difficulty drinking independently can make staying hydrated a challenge.

Tips to boost hydration:

- **Sip often** – set reminders to take small sips regularly throughout the day.
- **Make it easier** – use adaptive cups or straws if needed.
- **Eat your fluids** – soups, smoothies, and water-rich fruits and veg can all help.

3. Probiotics & prebiotics

Your gut is home to trillions of bacteria – and feeding the good ones can help support healthy digestion and regular bowel movements. That's where probiotics and prebiotics come in.

Where to find them:

- **Probiotics** – live, beneficial bacteria found in yoghurt, kefir, and fermented foods like kimchi and sauerkraut. They help balance gut microbes and support bowel health.
- **Prebiotics** – non-digestible fibres that feed your good gut bacteria. Found in garlic, onions, bananas, apples, asparagus and more, they help create a healthy environment for digestion.

4. Routine & timing

Eating at regular times can help train your gut into a rhythm. A consistent schedule supports bowel regularity – and so does knowing how to work with your body's natural signals.

Make the most of meal timing:

- **Stick to a routine** – eating at the same times each day can help regulate bowel movements.

• **Use the gastrocolic reflex** – this natural reflex kicks in after eating, so try scheduling toileting about 30 minutes after meals to take advantage of it.

5. Constipation & diarrhoea

Both constipation and diarrhoea are common challenges for people with neurological conditions – and both can often be managed with the right diet and hydration strategies. An Accredited Practising Dietitian can help identify dietary triggers and offer tailored advice to support regularity and comfort.

Tips for managing constipation:

- **Increase fibre slowly** – ramp it up gradually to avoid bloating.
- **Stay hydrated** – water helps fibre do its job.
- **Move when you can** – gentle movement may help stimulate bowel activity.
- **Consider supplements** – if food alone isn't enough, options like psyllium husk can help.

Tips for managing diarrhoea:

- **Watch for triggers** – caffeine, alcohol, artificial sweeteners, and too little soluble fibre may all contribute.
- **Go bland** – white rice, bananas, and toast can help firm things up.
- **Keep up fluids** – diarrhoea can dehydrate you quickly.

6. Medications

Some medications used to manage neurological conditions – including muscle relaxants, opioids, and antidepressants – can slow down the gut and lead to constipation.

What to do:

- **Talk to your doctor** – if you think your meds are affecting your bowels, speak with your GP or specialist about possible adjustments.
- **Get dietary support** – an Accredited Practising Dietitian can suggest food and fluid strategies to help ease side effects.

Final thoughts

Managing bowel health with a neurological condition takes a personalised and consistent approach. The right mix of fibre, fluids, probiotics and routine can help ease symptoms and support regularity. An Accredited Practising Dietitian can tailor advice to your needs, help troubleshoot issues, and make sure your diet is helping your gut do its job – comfortably. [A](#)

For more nutritional advice from Natalie, go to delectabledietetics.wordpress.com or check out her Instagram page: [instagram.com/nataliethompson.dietitian](https://www.instagram.com/nataliethompson.dietitian).

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Worth the drive

For George Bennett, travelling to Cairns twice every week is a small price to pay for the support he gets at the Healthy Living Centre.

George Bennett could probably make the 76-kilometre drive from Port Douglas to Cairns with his eyes closed – he’s been doing it twice a week for years.

“It’s a bit of a drive, but totally worth it,” says George, 34, who works as an accounts manager and payroll officer at a backpackers resort in Port Douglas. The reason for his regular trips? Physiotherapy sessions at the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre.

George has Laing distal myopathy, a rare, congenital muscle disorder that’s different for everyone but typically causes progressive weakness in the hands, feet and neck. In George’s case, it affects his whole body.

“The muscles grow to a certain point and then start wasting,” he explains. “It leaves me with a lot of general weakness, and very limited mobility in my arms and legs.”

Diagnosed at age three, George was initially told he had spinal muscular atrophy. A DNA test later confirmed the rarer condition of Laing distal myopathy. He began using a manual wheelchair around age 12, and added electric wheelchairs into the mix a few years later. These days, he uses a combination of both.

Despite the challenges, George lives independently and enjoys an active lifestyle. He moved to Port Douglas pretty much on a whim. “I came here for a month-long holiday in 2012 and had such a great time that I basically never left,” he laughs. “I had six months left of uni, so I went back to Melbourne to finish my degree, and then just a couple of days after my final exam I jumped in my car and drove straight back up. I never really looked back.”

George’s condition remained relatively stable until about five years ago, when his mobility began to decline, and he started searching for a Physiotherapist who was more specialised and could better meet his needs.

“A lot of people recommended Spinal Life’s Healthy Living Centre,” he says. “A friend of mine actually worked there, so





From left: George on the tilt table; in one of the accommodation units; working with Physiotherapist Adam. Photos courtesy Amanda Jade Photography.



she gave me a tour – I loved it straight away. As soon as I could get a spot, I started going.”

George now works primarily with Physiotherapist Adam Calleja. “It’s great having someone who knows my body so well, and knows what’s good for it – and what’s not.”

He has three physiotherapy sessions each week, starting with a session on the tilt table every Tuesday.

“One of the joys of Spinal Life is they have all this amazing equipment that you just don’t find at any other physio in this area – like the tilt table,” he says. “They strap me in, get my legs into the standing position, and then tilt the table upright. It uses my own body weight to stretch the muscles. Because I’m always sitting, my muscles naturally shorten. This helps keep them stretched out, in the position that they should naturally be in. It feels fantastic. And it’s really nice to be upright, at the height I should be, and at eye level with everybody.”

At George’s second session on a Tuesday he uses a Functional Electrical Stimulation (FES) machine. “It’s like an electric bike for your arms and legs,” he

says. “I use it for my arms. Electrodes stimulate muscles that have wasted and aren’t firing properly. It gives me more strength and gets those muscles working again. You don’t notice how hard you’re working until you stop and feel the burn.”

Thursdays are reserved for sessions in the Centre’s specialist hydrotherapy pool. “The pool is incredible and pretty high tech,” says George. “They’ve got lifts to get you in and out, and vents that create a current, like the pools elite swimmers use to train against resistance. It’s great for exercises and core strengthening, and it adds a bit of a challenge.”

But the thing he loves most about the pool is the fact that its temperature is maintained at 36°C. “Because of the lack of muscle on my body I get cold in most pools really quickly, so I have to get out after a really short time. But at the Healthy Living Centre I can stay in for the full session. It’s great for my muscles.”

George has also stayed at the Healthy Living Centre for weekend breaks, accompanied by his support worker. “It’s great to use the gym, have a change of scenery, and just bounce

around Cairns a bit. The location’s fantastic – right on the Esplanade and only about a 10-15-minute walk from the main street.”

He’s especially impressed by the level of accessibility in the accommodation: “It’s *extremely* accessible. You can tell someone with a disability has helped design it. When places say they’re ‘wheelchair-friendly,’ it usually just means the bathroom is a little larger and there’s a seat in the shower. But here, everything is spot-on. The doors are automatic, the spaces are big and open, the beds are adjustable, and the kitchen is fully accessible – the benches and cupboards move up and down with the press of a button.”

George stays in a two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit so his support workers have their own space too. “It has everything you need, including a fully self-contained kitchen as well as a washing machine and dryer,” he says. “It’s modern, comfortable and well thought out, and just feels like a home away from home.”

George last stayed at the Healthy Living Centre in March, and hopes to return again soon. He really enjoys travelling – particularly to Victoria and Western Australia to visit family – but as his needs increase, finding truly accessible accommodation is becoming more difficult.

“My needs aren’t as high as others, and yet it’s still difficult. I can’t imagine what it’s like for people with higher needs. We all just want to be able to live life, go places, and do things like anybody else. That’s why having somewhere like the Healthy Living Centre is so important. They’ve covered every base and you can tell they’ve really cared and thought things through – they’ve asked people like me what’s needed, and they’ve listened. And it shows.” **A**

Visit spinalhealthyliving.com.au to find out more.



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GETTING TO KNOW... Danielle Mans

Meet Spinal Life Key Worker, Danielle Mans. A proud mum of three – including two teenage daughters still at home – Danielle's life is full of activity and love. She lives on Brisbane's north side with her girls, partner, mother, and three dogs: a mini sausage dog, a border collie, and a German shepherd. Their home is always buzzing with guests, whether they're just dropping by for a quick catch-up or a longer stay. When she's not busy with work or family, Danielle loves escaping to the beach, going camping or boating, and discovering new places with her loved ones.

How long have you been working at Spinal Life?

"This October will be eight years."

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

"I started as a Personal Support Worker (PSW) and have been a Regional Key Worker for the north side, a Service Establishment Key Worker, and now am a Complex Support Key Worker."

What sort of experience/qualifications did you have in order to secure the role of Key Worker?

"I have worked with more than 100 clients with Spinal Life across all levels of support needs. I have done personal studies as well as all extended competencies that Spinal Life offers."

What three words describe you best?

"Loyal, caring, hardworking."

What are the main responsibilities of a Key Worker?

"Writing and updating individual support plans and residential hazard inspections. Training staff, communication with Client Service Officers and leading by example by following policies and procedures."

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

"Excellent communication, reliability, consistency, flexibility and being able to maintain appropriate boundaries while still being approachable."

Can you describe an average day in your role?

"An average day consists of training new team members, stock control and ordering, assisting my client with organising or attending medical appointments, as well as personal care and assisting them with whatever is needed for the day."

What's the funniest/most embarrassing moment you've ever had while on a job?

"Last year I split my pants at the very beginning of a nine-and-a-half-hour shift! Luckily I had a jumper to put around my waist and it gave everyone something to laugh about."

And the most life-affirming moment?

"I was recently able to assist in the planning and organisation of a ventilated client to travel overseas. This is something that took a lot of planning by medical professionals, and at times we didn't think would be a possibility. But it happened, and now they are back safely and got to go on a trip that many thought was impossible. Being able to assist in any way was an absolute pleasure and inspiring to all involved."

What's the one thing you wish more people would understand about

spinal cord injuries?

"Too often, people view people with spinal cord injuries as fragile or incapable. In reality the people I have met with spinal cord injuries are strong and capable people who lead meaningful lives. They still have goals, relationships, careers, humour, creativity and resilience. It's about recognition of the person beyond the injury and advocating for a world that empowers their independence, respects their autonomy and values their contribution."

What one thing could make your job easier?

"Having more amazing PSWs joining Spinal Life."

What's the best thing about your job?

"Working with amazing clients, Personal Support Workers and Spinal Life staff."

What's the hardest thing about your job?

"At times it can be difficult to leave life stresses at home, we all have things going on at times. For me it's important to leave that behind and always try and give the best of myself to my clients and team members."

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

"Try and work with as many clients as possible – don't be nervous to fill a shift with a client you haven't been to before. The more you do it, the more you learn – and you get to meet some amazing people."

What is the most important lesson your work has taught you?

"To never assume what someone can or can't do – let them show or tell you. And listening is more valuable than guessing." [A](#)

To nominate a Spinal Life team member to feature in a future issue, email: theadvocate@spinal.com.au



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Thank you, Frances

After 37 years of tireless commitment, trailblazing leadership and deep compassion, Frances Porter has stepped away from her role at Spinal Life Australia. While she may be moving on to new adventures, her influence will remain woven into the fabric of the organisation – and into the lives of countless people she has supported, championed and inspired.

Frances began her journey with Spinal Life in 1987, when she and Donna Harre launched what would become the Spinal Allied Health Service. Back then, it was called the Community Advisory Service – a team of just two, travelling across Queensland to help people with spinal cord injuries get the equipment, support and advocacy they needed to live independently.

At the time, there were no visiting OTs or physios. So Frances, a nurse by background, didn't just advise and advocate – she also assessed homes, prescribed wheelchairs, and did whatever was needed to help people move forward after injury.

That “whatever it takes” attitude never wavered. Over the decades that followed, Frances helped guide Spinal Life through enormous change – 11 CEOs, countless restructures and a major evolution in the way disability services are delivered. Through it all, she never lost sight of the reason behind the work: making life better for people with spinal cord injuries.

A fierce advocate, strategic thinker and generous mentor, Frances has been the driving force behind many of Spinal Life's most significant initiatives. She played a pivotal role in establishing both the Brisbane and Cairns Healthy Living Centres, launched the the Back2Work project (which recently celebrated its 500th referral), and helped shape the organisation into the strong, client-centred advocate it is today.

She served on countless health and advisory committees, and was instrumental in the formation of the

National Injury Insurance Scheme Queensland, working alongside the state's Insurance Commissioner to create better long-term outcomes for people with serious injuries.

Under her leadership, Spinal Life's allied health team has become one of the most respected in the sector – known for listening to clients, acting on their needs, and offering smart, personalised solutions. Frances brought clarity, focus, empathy and a famously dry sense of humour to every conversation, always finding a way to move forward, even in the most complex circumstances.

Frances has supported our members through life's highs and lows, and her departure marks the end of a remarkable chapter. She leaves behind an enduring legacy – not just in programs and policies, but in the lives of the people who are living more independently and confidently because of her work.

Frances, thank you for everything you've done, everything you've built, and everything you've made possible. You'll be deeply missed – but we hope you'll stay close and keep watching, as the vision you shaped continues to grow.

EverActive: A new way to stay strong, social and independent

Sporting Wheelies' new EverActive program helps over-60s build strength, boost balance and stay active in everyday life.

Weekly 45-minute sessions feature six fun, functional exercise stations designed to improve mobility, confidence and independence. No fitness experience is needed, and every class ends with morning tea for a social catch-up.

Run by qualified exercise physiologists, EverActive is tailored to individual needs and goals. A free phone assessment ensures the right fit, and the first two sessions are free (after that, it's \$15 per class).

Held Wednesdays at the Sporting Wheelies HQ in Milton, the program is backed by research showing targeted balance training can reduce fall risk by up to 39%.

More than just exercise, EverActive is about staying strong, connected and in control of your future.

To learn more or book your free assessment, email mailbox@sportingwheelies.org.au or call **07 3253 3333**.

Sea change

It was sun, surf and smiles all round on 16 April, when Emu Park Main Beach, near Yeppoon, hosted the U-BEACH Community Access Day – an event designed to make beach time more inclusive for people of all abilities.

Thanks to a funding grant for the event, attendees were able to make the most of essential beach access equipment including all-terrain walkers and floating wheelchairs.

Spinal Life's Rockhampton team and Move Mobility played a key role in helping make the day a success – providing a private marquee, equipment and support staff to assist with changing and transfers to and from beach equipment.

The day also featured a classic Aussie touch: a community sausage sizzle, bringing everyone together for a post-swim snack and a friendly chat.

The event was part of CQUniversity's U-BEACH initiative and also celebrated recent permanent accessibility improvements at Emu Park Main Beach, including beach matting and specialised equipment for ongoing use.

With local organisations, volunteers and community members coming together to make it happen, the day was a great reminder that sometimes the best access starts with a bit of teamwork – and a lot of heart.

For those who've long watched from the shoreline, U-BEACH offers a powerful message: the beach really is for everyone.

Call **1300 774 625** to learn more about our services in Central Queensland and Wide Bay.



Spinal Life and Move Mobility were in action at the U-BEACH Community Access Day.



FIND AN EVENT IN YOUR REGION

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

You can visit spinal.com.au/events for upcoming event dates, or use the contact details below to get in touch with our Peer Support, Post Polio or Transverse Myelitis groups.

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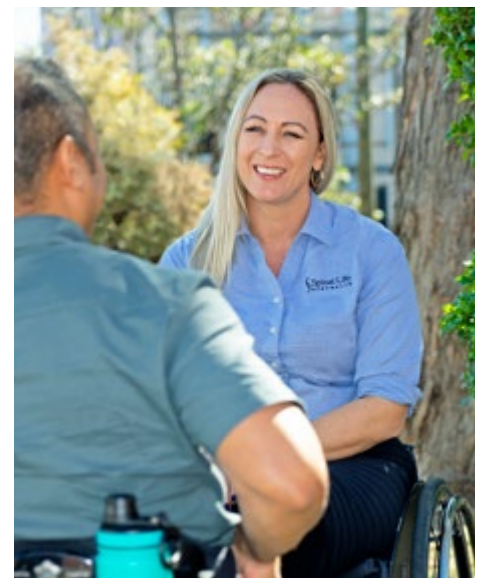
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Sign up for events by joining our community at spinal.com.au/membership or call **1300 774 625** to find out more.

Reinventing the wheel

Why these eye-catching wheel covers are more than just accessories

Jo Chambers' colourful, themed wheel covers do more than brighten a wheelchair – they spark conversations and help break down barriers.

"Kids at school suddenly get noticed," she says. "Instead of being ignored, they're hearing 'I love your wheels!' and being included. It's a game-changer."

Other Colour My Wheels customers have told Jo the same thing: *I feel seen. I feel human again.*

"They're not just covers," she says. "They're connection."

Jo sees the impact first-hand when she's out with her mum, Margaret, who uses a wheelchair. "Normally, people talk over Mum," she says. "But when she has the wheel covers on, strangers stop to compliment them – and end up talking to *her* instead."

When her mum first started using a wheelchair, Jo did everything she could to brighten her world – sewing cushions, adding curtains, and decorating her room.

"And then I thought about her wheelchair – I knew there had to be something I could do to make it look more joyful," Jo says. She found a company online that made wheel covers, ordered a set, and was struck by the impact of such a simple concept.

"I couldn't stop thinking about it," she says.

But life got in the way, and the idea was shelved.

Still, Jo couldn't shake the concept and, two years ago, Colour My Wheels was born – quite the pivot for someone with a background in catering, including five years on the road across Europe, feeding international music acts like Beyoncé, Cher, Bon Jovi and Barbra Streisand. Her favourite? "Hands down, Pink," she says without hesitation.

Jo admits she went into her new business completely blind. "It's been a massive baptism of fire," she says.

She started from scratch, developing her own processes through months of research and trial and error. From the beginning, she was determined to make every part of the business sustainable, recyclable and 100% Australian made.

"I wanted to create something beautiful – but also responsible," she says. "I took the time to get it right and



This pic: Jo Chambers with her mum, Margaret, who inspired the colourful wheel covers.
Below: Australian powerlifter, Hani Watson and fellow Colour My Wheels fan, Steve.

partnered with people who care about their footprint as much as I do." That includes her Brisbane-based printers, who use non-toxic inks, recycle all materials, and even feed excess solar power back into the grid.

Each set of wheel covers is custom-made to fit the exact specifications of the user's wheelchair – no easy task given the range of sizes and push rim shapes. Every set is unique.

Although most of Jo's customers are based in Australia, word is spreading. One Canadian Paralympian has become a big fan of her designs, and at the Paris Paralympics in 2024, four Australian athletes proudly sported her official Indigenous-design wheel covers. "They looked phenomenal," says Jo. "There were only four of them – I can't even imagine how amazing it would look with the whole team."

That's exactly the vision for Brisbane 2032. Jo is already working closely with athletes like para powerlifter Hani Watson, who's now pushing to have custom wheelchair covers included as part of the official team uniforms.

The creative possibilities keep growing, and the future is full of promise. Colour My Wheels now features more than 45 designs – all printed on durable, fully recyclable polypropylene – with around half of all orders being custom. Jo also showcases the work of seven Australian artists, including two Indigenous creatives, and is actively seeking artists with disabilities to join the range.

"Everything I do is about connection, creativity, and visibility," Jo says. "That's what drives me."

To get your own incredible piece of NDIS-approved wheelchair art, head to colourmywheels.com.au. Subscribe for 15% off your first set and access to exclusive deals, new designs, and bigger discounts down the track.





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