

The Advocate

A VOICE FOR ACCESSIBLE, EQUITABLE AND EMPOWERED LIVES | AUTUMN 2026

A photograph of two women in a gym or rehabilitation center. The woman in the foreground is seated in a wheelchair, wearing a bright pink t-shirt with a circular logo that reads "Walking with a Spinal Life". She is smiling warmly at the camera. In the background, another woman, also in a pink t-shirt, is standing and smiling. The setting includes blue exercise equipment and a window with vertical blinds.

**The dynamic duo
changing lives –
out of a shed**

**Plus: The power
of pickleball**

A green circular logo for Spinal Life Australia, featuring a stylized spine icon to the left of the text.

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Welcome to our new-look Advocate!

Welcome to the first issue of *The Advocate* for 2026. With a new look, we're delighted to be kicking off another year of remarkable stories, practical advice, advocacy updates and insights from across our community.

As we go to print, we have just marked International Women's Day on 8 March, making it especially fitting that this issue celebrates the achievements of several remarkable women. You'll meet Ava, who shares her powerful comeback story following a spinal cord injury sustained during her gymnastics career. Seeing a gap in support, Ava turned her own experience into action by establishing a community 'library' of disability equipment to help others.

You'll also hear from Charmaine, who at 70 years young proves that age is no barrier to adventure. She continues to explore and review some of South East Queensland's best accessible locations, including taking on indoor rock climbing. We also introduce you to Haley, whose lived experience now informs her work supporting others as part of the Spinal Life team.

Beyond these personal stories, this issue explores what's happening

across our programs and services. You can learn more about the growing popularity of adaptive pickleball, now offered through Sporting Wheelies as a new social sport, as well as our Peer Support Catch-Ups and how they help people connect, share experiences and build community.

Last, but definitely not least, we're celebrating Spinal Life Honorary Life Member, Bill Simpson, whose service to his local community was recognised when he was named the 2026 Australia Day Award winner, presented by the Scope Club of Wynnnum. He's a fantastic ambassador and advocate.

If you know someone whose story should be told in a future issue, we'd love to hear from you! Please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Finally, a quick reminder that we are continuing to update our member register and have written to many members to verify or update their contact details. Membership is free and provides access to important benefits, including voting at our Annual General Meeting, advocacy opportunities, social activities and *The Advocate*. If you receive a reminder from us, please take a moment to let us know your contact details are still correct.

As always, I welcome your feedback at chair@spinal.com.au. I hope you enjoy this issue and wish you all the very best for the coming months. **A**

Gyl Stacey
GYL STACEY

DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?

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



4 questions with the CEO

Mark Townend shares what's been happening at Spinal Life – and what's next.



1. What's happening in the NDIS advocacy space?

We are continuing to support people with disability through both individual and systemic advocacy, even as the NDIS landscape becomes increasingly complex. Recent legislative changes mean providers can no longer act as independent advocates for participants, if they are also delivering NDIS services to them. While we understand the need to manage potential conflicts of interest, we're hearing from a growing number of participants and families who are finding plan reviews and tribunal processes stressful, time-consuming and difficult to navigate.

When people with disability are struggling to access the funding they need, yet millions of dollars are being spent by the NDIA on legal fees to contest appeals, it's clear the system isn't working as it should. We remain committed to speaking up, as advocates and as taxpayers, to push for a fairer, more balanced NDIS that truly puts participants first.

2. What's the latest on the Brisbane Precinct?

It's exciting to see real momentum building for the Brisbane Precinct. With a project manager now appointed, we're working closely with the Queensland Government to shape a development that delivers lasting benefits for people with disability and the wider community.

The Precinct is being planned as a welcoming, fully accessible hub near the Princess Alexandra Hospital, bringing together accommodation, rehabilitation, wellbeing and community services in one location. With growing interest from potential partners – and development approval already in place for our existing Woolloongabba site – we're well positioned to maximise future reinvestment into a Precinct that supports our community now and for generations to come.

3. What else can we expect from Spinal Life in 2026?

Looking ahead, we're focused on building partnerships that allow us to offer more holistic support, including dietetics, pain management and improved rehabilitation outcomes. We're also continuing to collaborate with researchers from The Hopkins Centre, Griffith University and other leading institutions on projects exploring topics including sleep health, AI wound assessments and virtual reality wheelchair simulators.

We're pleased to see our investment in Move Mobility beginning to deliver financial returns, while also enabling us to play a more active role in improving the equipment supply industry, by sharing our experience and feedback from our community.

4. What else has the team been up to?

We recently had the pleasure of welcoming international accessible travel advocate John Morris from WheelchairTravel.org to Brisbane, giving us the chance to showcase the city's growing range of inclusive tourism experiences, from the Story Bridge to accessible dining and river travel.

It was a great opportunity to highlight what's possible in the accessible tourism space, and we look forward to sharing more about John's visit in the next issue of the magazine.

As always, I'd love to hear from you. Please feel free to get in touch at ceo@spinal.com.au, and I look forward to sharing more updates in the next issue of *The Advocate*. 

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A **SHED**LOAD of help

Founded by 17-year-old Ava Costa, The Sharing Shed is providing life-changing equipment... for free.

Main photos: Stephen Lawrence

In 2023, Ava Costa was 14 years old, an elite gymnast and – as the youngest member of the Australian Olympic training squad – on track to compete at the 2024 Olympics in Paris. But then, during a routine gymnastics training session, she sustained a serious spinal cord injury resulting in quadriplegia.

“When life-changing things happen, you can go down a rabbit hole,” says Randi Costa, Ava’s mum and fiercest

advocate. “But we decided very early on that we were going to be as positive and strong as possible, because that’s the only way you can get through things like this. We chose a higher path of education and helping.”

They sure did. Today, Ava is a powerful voice of hope and resilience on social media, her posts resonating with others living with spinal cord injury, young athletes, families and supporters across the globe.

PHOTO

Ava Costa at The Sharing Shed in Tingalpa. Together with her mum Randi, she's launched a kind of community lending library – for assistive equipment.

One such post sums things up beautifully: “My injury changed my body, not my mindset.”

It's those same qualities that once powered Ava's gymnastics – mental toughness, focus and determination – that she's now channelling into helping others, as the force behind a remarkable new equipment exchange called The Sharing Shed.

“It's an idea that's been in the back of our minds from very early on,” says Ava, who's now 17 and in her final year of school. “It was so hard and expensive to source the equipment that I needed, and we knew so many other people would be in the same boat.”

Ava ultimately spent 168 days in hospital – but could have gone home much sooner if she'd been able to access the specialised items she needed. One such item, her ‘proper’ prescribed wheelchair, took a full year to arrive. In the meantime, the hire costs for a temporary chair were so steep that it was actually cheaper to buy it outright – so they did.

“But then,” says Randi, “once Ava got her new wheelchair, she kept saying, ‘What shall we do with the old one? It's just sitting there – we should give it to someone.’”

And so the idea for The Sharing Shed was born. It's built on a simple premise: so many people are in need of assistive technology equipment – and so many others have perfectly good items lying around and gathering dust.

Their genius idea quickly gathered momentum. “Eventually we thought, let's have a crack,” says Randi. In October last year, after being gifted six months of storage space in Tingalpa by Brightside Disability Support, they proudly launched The Sharing Shed.

The online network helps people with spinal cord injuries connect with essential equipment – items they're unable to access through the NDIS, and simply can't afford to buy themselves. In essence, it's a community-led lending library that gives unused equipment a second life. And because everything's been donated by people who no longer need it, everything is free.

“It's all happening much faster than we expected,” says Ava. “When we started we thought that if we could just help one person, we would have done something good. But we've already helped so many people and gone way beyond our expectations for the first year.”

As well as rehoming Ava's first wheelchair, they've been able to connect people with all sorts of essential equipment.

“We recently heard about two refugees who came over from Myanmar and had absolutely *nothing*. We managed to get them two wheelchairs, a shower commode, two hospital beds, two mattresses and a hoist,” says Randi.

“Another person who reached out to us was an occupational therapist who works full-time, and wasn't able to access a wheelchair through the NDIS. We managed to get her a chair that was almost a perfect match. She sent us the most beautiful email that had us all in tears. Her supervisor at work called a bit later and said, ‘She hasn't missed a day of work since you got her the chair – you've changed her life.’”

And ultimately, that's what it's all about: kindness and community.”

AVA COSTA

Because it depends entirely on donations, The Sharing Shed is growing organically.

“No matter what's needed, we can't give something out unless it's donated first. That's just how the system works,” Randi explains. “And that's the hardest part, because everyone's needs are unique, and we obviously don't have every single product that's requested. We always feel so guilty when we can't help someone – we have to put them on a waiting list and hope that someone will eventually donate what they need.”

Even though The Sharing Shed is a Queensland initiative for now, they're already getting lots of requests from around the country.

“Logistically, it's a bit trickier, but we've already managed to get a chair for someone in Perth, and we're also working to help some people in Sydney and Victoria,” says Randi. “We've even had an international request – and we were able to fulfil it! Someone contacted us from New Jersey needing a particular piece of equipment, and we reached out to an organisation over there that was able to help. That's the power of community.” →



So what sort of equipment is needed?

“Wheelchairs are probably our most-requested item, followed by power-assist devices – but they’re so expensive and we’ve only managed to get our hands on one so far,” says Ava.

They filled the storage unit remarkably quickly – despite giving so much away. Thankfully, Storage King has come on board as a sponsor and donated another unit, so that Ava and Randi can accept even more equipment and keep the mission growing.

“The whole thing is still very new, and we’re still building it – figuring out what works, and how to get equipment

to the people who need it,” says Randi. “Once we’ve got everything running smoothly, our next step is to apply for grants. If we’re successful, we’ll be able to secure more storage space, develop an easy-to-use app to replace our current database, and cover costs like transportation.”

For now, transportation is very much a family affair too. Ava’s hugely supportive older brothers, Jacob, Luke and Ben, handle most of the pick-ups and drop-offs using the family’s wheelchair-accessible vehicle – currently the only one they have that’s big enough.

At this stage, The Sharing Shed is running on sheer determination – and the kindness of the community. It’s powered by word of mouth, Ava’s social media, and



PHOTO

Clockwise from far left: Randi and Ava at The Sharing Shed; Ava and friend on day one; just some of the equipment that now fills the shed; more donations are welcome, thanks to sponsor Storage King providing another unit; it's a real family affair – Ava's older brothers (L-R) Ben, Luke and Jacob are in charge of transport; Ava on a balance beam, aged 14.

a growing network of people and organisations who want to help.

“We’ve reached out to the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane to try and source equipment,” says Randi. “Ava’s a regular there – she goes every week to use the adaptive gym equipment. She’s also a client of Spinal Life’s Allied Health services for nursing assistance, goes to Making Strides, and is part of the BioSpine trial at Griffith University in Southport. When it came to support, we cast our net far and wide!”

As far as The Sharing Shed goes, it feels like the start of something truly special – not just an initiative, but the beginning of a movement.

“We knew that there was a need, and now that things are up and running we can clearly see that there’s so much potential to help people,” Ava says. “Ultimately, that’s what it’s all about: kindness and community. And supporting people who don’t have access to things that will help them live their lives with freedom, confidence and dignity.” **A**

The Sharing Shed is powered by the Walking With Ava Foundation and sponsored by Storage King. If you need equipment or have items to donate, contact The Sharing Shed at walkingwithava.org

Insta inspo

Don’t forget to follow Ava at [instagram.com/walkingwithava](https://www.instagram.com/walkingwithava) where she uses disarming honesty, dark humour and the power of friendship to spread her message of determination and positivity.

Fans, followers and fellow gymnasts from all across the globe have shared messages of support for Ava – even gymnastics legends Nadia Comaneci and the GOAT, Simone Biles.



PHOTO

1. Charmaine Idris tackles a top rope climb. 2. Making steady progress. 3. Sian Spencer and friends showing off the Paraclimbing QLD t-shirt. 4. Sian testing Charmaine's ropes. 5. The climbing clan. 6. Just hanging around. 7. Charmaine with her support person, Tracie. 8. I did it!

Climbing the walls

Charmaine Idris enjoys a hands-on – and hands-only – experience with top-rope climbing, thanks to Paraclimbing QLD.

Everybody knows indoor rock climbing, but have you ever heard of top-rope climbing? It's a beginner-friendly style of climbing where the rope is already secured at the top of the route, giving you extra support as you focus on the movement and the thrill of going up. And yes – it can be adapted in all sorts of ways for people with disability.

Eager to chase a natural – and literal – high, I headed to Urban Climb in West End one Wednesday evening to try this indoor adventure that's definitely not for anyone with vertigo.

The atmosphere was *electrifying*. Around 40 indoor climbing routes cater to everyone from beginners (look for the sunflowers marking the easier climbs) to experts tackling tricky overhangs and underhangs.

The walls were teeming with fast and fearless climbers, all seeming to channel Spider-Man. Dogs waited patiently at the base while their owners tackled wall after wall. I watched in awe as a little girl climbed the same route twice in a row, then did a backflip the moment her toes hit the ground.

I signed the compulsory waiver, sat through the induction spiel, and watched a hands-on demo of how 'belaying' works.

The climber is clipped to a rope, and someone on the ground – the belayer – controls it through a safety device, feeding it out as the person climbs, and keeping it snug so they're supported if they slip or need a breather. With the basics covered, I was strapped securely into a

harness and collected my climbing shoes (the shoes are quite narrow, so I opted for one size up). Then I headed to the meeting wall to join a top-rope climbing social session with Paraclimbing QLD.

Founded in 2024 by Rani and Sian Spencer, Paraclimbing QLD is a social club for paraclimbing, providing a safe, inclusive space for people with physical or vision impairments to try climbing. It's for people of all abilities, and focuses on adaptive techniques and fostering social connection.

For my first climb I was lucky enough to have Sian as my belayer. My rope was secured by two steel locking carabiners, and then it was go-time. The challenge was simple in theory: pull myself up the wall using footholds as handholds.

I tried to use my left leg (the stronger of the two) whenever the placement allowed, but mostly it was a matter of problem-solving – adjusting my body to each hold, one move at a time.

Determined to finish the climb, I took it slow and steady, working at my own pace. With Sian's calm, skilful belaying, I made it all the way to the top of the wall.

And when I looked down, I realised it was the furthest – and highest – I'd ever been from my wheelchair.

It was an adrenaline rush like no other, and that moment of exhilaration will stay with me forever. →



PHOTO

Charmaine Idris (right) with her belayer for the day, Sian Spencer, the co-founder of Paraclimbing QLD.

Before you climb

Where: Paraclimbing QLD sessions at Urban Climb, 2/220 Montague Road, West End.

When: First Sunday of each month, 3–5pm.

What to wear: Comfortable clothes. Leggings or longer shorts work best with a harness. Bring socks for hire shoes.

Beginners welcome: Social sessions are the perfect place to try climbing in a supported environment.

Do I need a support person? It depends on your needs. If you require assistance with transfers or putting on a harness, let the team know in advance.

Can I climb in my wheelchair? Some people do, but it's not recommended for beginners as the extra weight can make climbing more difficult.

Venue accessibility: Ramp access to the main climbing area, flat surfaces throughout, and one accessible bathroom on site (with a small rim between the shower and toilet area).

Parking: One accessible bay on site; street parking on Montague Road.

The best kind of social climbing

Sian Spencer is the co-founder of Paraclimbing QLD – and one of Australia's leading voices in the growing world of paraclimbing.

A physiotherapist, passionate social climber and 2019 Churchill Fellow (awarded to 'ordinary people doing extraordinary things'), Sian has spent years exploring the rehabilitative benefits of climbing and working to make the sport more accessible for people with physical or vision impairments.

We asked her to tell us more about the exciting, adaptive pastime that is top rope climbing.

What makes top-rope climbing such a safe option – especially for people with disability?

“In top-rope climbing, the rope is already anchored at the top of the wall, and the climber stays connected to it the entire time. A belayer manages the rope through a belay device, so if the climber slips, they're caught immediately. It's what makes the sport feel adventurous – but incredibly safe.”

How is it adapted for people with disability?

“It's very individualised. Many paraclimbers require no adaptation at all. Some need specialised harnesses or shoes. Some need assistance on the wall itself, with someone climbing beside them, while others benefit from a gentle pulley system to help them get to the top.”

Can anyone join a Paraclimbing QLD event?

“With adequate notice, we can accommodate anyone at our events – it's all about ensuring we have the right equipment and the right people available.”

What should people know before joining a session?

“If it's a spur-of-the-moment decision, it's worth knowing that to climb in a standard harness, you generally need reasonable trunk control – think independently sitting and balancing on a plinth – and enough grip strength to hold a coffee cup.”

Could paraclimbing be part of the Brisbane 2032 Games?

“The program for the 2032 Olympics and Paralympics hasn't been announced yet, but I really hope we'll see both climbing and paraclimbing at the Games.” [A](#)

Interested in giving it a go? Follow Paraclimbing QLD on Instagram: [instagram.com/paraclimbingqld](https://www.instagram.com/paraclimbingqld) or go to [urbanclimb.com.au](https://www.urbanclimb.com.au) for upcoming sessions and support.



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Start comfortable. Stay confident.

In a PICKLE

Pickleball is one of the fastest-growing and most inclusive sports in the world – and Cory Mostran is helping lead the charge in Queensland.

Photos: Stephen Lawrence



If you've noticed more people wielding paddles instead of racquets at your local tennis courts, you're not imagining things. You're witnessing the astonishing rise of pickleball.

Played with solid paddles and a lightweight plastic ball with holes – often on a tennis court, which can comfortably fit two pickleball courts – the sport is described as part tennis, part badminton and part table tennis.

Whatever the mix, it's a game that's easy to learn, wildly addictive and genuinely fun.

Perhaps most importantly, though, it's also highly adaptable and accessible to all. It's one of those rare sports where people of different ages and abilities can genuinely play together. No wonder it's one of the fastest-growing

games in the world – including here in Australia, where more than 155,000 people now play.

One such person is Cory Mostran, 35.

"I always say: give me a ball or a bat, and I'll have a go," he laughs.

Originally from Alice Springs, Cory moved to Queensland in 2013, after he broke his back while riding a dirt bike.

"It was 2011. I was 20 years old and working as a qualified baker," he says. "I sustained a T5/T6 spinal cord injury, did 10 months in rehab in Adelaide, and then went back to Alice Springs – but there wasn't much there for a sport-loving wheelchair user."

PHOTO

Clockwise from left: pickleball addict, Cory Mostran; reaching for a backhand; a quick paddle tap between points between players at Get Pickld in Meadowbrook.

So Cory and his mum Sharon and stepdad Kerm made the decision to start again in Brisbane, where his sister Gemma and brother-in-law Shaun were already living.

It was a good decision. “I love Brisbane,” says Cory.

He and Shaun were looking for a sport they could play together and came across Wheelchair Rugby League. The brothers-in-law were instrumental in establishing the inclusive sport in South East Queensland and helping their team win six State of Origin trophies. When they retired in 2025, they were the most-capped players in Queensland Wheelchair Rugby League history, tied at the top with 10 caps each.

But even though Cory stepped away from Wheelchair Rugby League last year, his passion for sport has only grown. That’s because he found pickleball.

On a tip from his sister, Gemma, he started playing at a club in Morayfield. From there, it didn’t take long for Cory’s pickleball family to expand, when he met the players from Club Tropic, based at Deception Bay.

“I just started chatting with them at an interclub challenge game one day,” he says. “There’s such a great vibe at that club – the boys are from the Pacific Islands and just love playing music and having a laugh. It felt a bit like home, so I joined the team. They’re so welcoming.”

And, importantly, they don’t treat Cory any differently, despite him using a wheelchair to play: “They just see me as a person,” he says. “It’s not Cory in the chair. It’s just Cory.”

So, how does pickleball work, exactly, if you’re playing in a wheelchair?

The game follows many of the same principles as wheelchair tennis – with one key difference that changes everything: the ball is allowed to bounce twice before being returned. And, crucially, the second bounce can happen anywhere on the playing surface – even outside the court lines.

This simple rule change transforms the game, giving players time to manoeuvre into position and stay in the rally, while keeping the pace exciting and competitive.

“It’s such a fun, addictive game,” says Cory. “It combines technique, balance, power and strategy – it really makes you think. I love it.”

Players can compete in singles, doubles, or mixed formats with standing players and wheelchair users. As well as playing at Get Pickld in Meadowbrook, Cory also plays at the Para Pickle Social Club at Shaw Park in Woolloowin.

The Para Pickle Social Club – which Cory says is the biggest para club in Australia at the moment – was founded by Paralympian and former Sporting Wheelies Board Chair, Michael Dobbie-Bridges (aka ‘Dobbie’).

“Pickleball is one of those rare sports where everyone really can play together,” says Dobbie. “I love how simple and adaptable the game is. Whether you’re in a sports wheelchair or on your feet, you can jump on court, learn quickly and feel part of the action straight away.”

With pickleball booming across the country, it was only a matter of time before Sporting Wheelies brought this hugely addictive sport into their program. As one of Australia’s top-ranked pickleball players, Dobbie was at the head of the charge, and a key figure at the recent ‘Pickleball for All’ open day at the Sporting Wheelies Clubhouse in Milton.

By his side was Cory, who was proud to help Dobbie and Sporting Wheelies introduce the sport to others. →

Pickleball in 60 seconds

What you need: a paddle, a plastic ball and a court (about one-third the size of a tennis court).

How you play: singles, doubles and hybrid (one standing, one para player).

How you score: games are usually first to 11 points (win by two).

How you serve: underarm.

Wheelchair rule: wheelchair players can let the ball bounce twice.

The “kitchen”: the no-volley zone near the net that prevents close-range smashes – keeping rallies longer and more strategic.

Celeb fans: LeBron James, Tom Brady, Steffi Graf, Andre Agassi.

Watch out for: “Pickleball Addiction Disorder” (PAD) – characterised by intense play and a desire to play seven days a week!



PHOTO

Left, from top: Cory with a wicked forehand; with some of his fellow pickleballers at Get Pickld, including top Australian players Dion Reweti (green hat) and Michael Dobbie-Bridges (navy blue hat).

But admiration doesn't cancel ambition. Cory may be a fan of Dobbie, but he's also determined to beat him. To get there, he's training seven days a week, with a schedule that combines court sessions, strength work, coaching, nutrition and fitness.

"I want to be the Australian number one – I'm on the verge, but first I've got to beat Dobbie," he laughs. "I've got to beat him and Dion Reweti at the Australian Pickleball Championships. They're the two strongest players in Australia, but I'll keep training and keep playing with them, and hopefully I'll take that spot off them soon!"

Of course, not everyone who picks up a paddle is looking to be number one in Australia.

But a word of warning: if you **do** start playing pickleball, you may very well become obsessed – just like Cory and so many others. One minute you'll be living a perfectly normal life. The next, you'll be dropping terms like 'Erne' and 'dink' into everyday conversation and inviting your friends to join you for a social hit.

The good news? Sporting Wheelies' Pickleball for All program is now giving more Queenslanders the chance to pick up a paddle, learn the ropes and see what all the fuss is about for themselves.

Because whether you're chasing national rankings or simply chasing connection, confidence or community, everyone belongs on the pickleball court. **A**

Find out more about Sporting Wheelies' Pickleball for All program in Milton: sportingwheelies.org.au/pickleball

Pickleball for all

Sporting Wheelies' Pickleball for All program is proudly supported by Obelisk Pickleball, a Queensland-owned paddle company committed to growing the game in an inclusive way.

"Pickleball has an incredible ability to bring people together," says Obelisk owner Vinh Truong. "At Obelisk, we're passionate about supporting initiatives like Pickleball for All that break down barriers and create inclusive, welcoming communities through sport."



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6 The a.m. club

Three mornings a week, Tim Skelly is first through the doors at the Healthy Living Centre.

Main photos: Stephen Lawrence

Three mornings a week, if you head to the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre in Woolloongabba bright and early, you're likely to find just one person there: Tim Skelly.

By 6am he's already moving through his routine – leg press, reformer, treadmill, parallel bars – working steadily as the sun rises outside, before the heat of the day really kicks in.

“I like to get my workout done before the team arrives and they start physio and training sessions with other clients,” says Tim, 67, a former shearer and heavy haulage driver.

Up until last November, Tim was also benefitting from regular physiotherapy sessions at the Healthy Living Centre, as well as help from Exercise Physiologists and Allied Health Assistants – it was the first professional support he'd had in years.

It all started back in December 2007, after he was dumped by a wave at Mooloolaba Beach. Tim woke up on Christmas Day to discover that in the space of just four days he had sustained an incomplete C4 spinal cord injury, undergone major surgery – and become a father, after his long-awaited daughter Tiana was born on Christmas Eve.

During rehabilitation for his incomplete injury Tim practised walking relentlessly and, months later, even managed to walk out of hospital unaided. He continued physiotherapy for a further three years, but from 2011, for more than a decade, Tim relied on self-devised exercises to maintain strength and to try and improve his ‘dodgy’ walk.

“I walked laps in a nearby pool and climbed steps in the park across the road from us,” he says. “I was so motivated that I was going up and down 1,000 steps a day. Sometimes twice a day.”

PHOTO

Opposite page: Leg curls at dawn for Tim Skelly. This page, from left: Tim's goal is to increase his leg press from 35kg to 40; in 2007 Tim got a spinal cord injury and a new baby – all within four days.



At the same time, he was raising Tiana – now 18 – as a single father.

“I brought her up alone from when she was three. No carers, no support staff. I even did my own housework,” he says.

Over time, however, his legs became increasingly unstable, crossing over unexpectedly and causing frequent falls.

“I’d wake up every day thinking, today’s going to be different, today will be better,” he says. “But it never was.”

And so in April 2024, after a referral through the Princess Alexandra Hospital, Tim finally returned to physiotherapy – this time at the Healthy Living Centre.

Thanks to a personalised program and constant guidance from the Physiotherapists, Exercise Physiologists and Allied Health Assistants, Tim’s strength and confidence began returning, and exercises that once felt impossible slowly became achievable.

“I owe them all so much,” says Tim.

A serious fall at home in early 2025 temporarily set him back, and then in November another challenge emerged.

“Unfortunately, I ran out of NDIS funding and have to wait until it’s all sorted out,” he says. “My Spinal Life Plan Manager is helping me – there’s plenty of money there, but I just need them to transfer some of it into the account that will let me have physio.”

In the meantime, it hasn’t stopped him training. He still works out at the Healthy Living Centre three or four mornings a week, following the program designed by his therapists.

After years of going it alone, it’s not just the equipment that keeps him coming back – it’s also the connection. Between exercise sessions, members at the Healthy Living Centre gather for tea or coffee, swapping stories and advice.

“We’re all in the same boat. We have a laugh and good conversations, and no one sits around feeling sorry for themselves – it’s like being at a pub or a café and having a yarn with mates,” he says.

“And then there’s the staff – I appreciate them so much,” he says. “Everyone’s so professional and welcoming, and they genuinely want to help people get better. I love the Healthy Living Centre, it’s a fantastic place.”

One morning, Tim mentioned he likes peppermint tea. The next time he arrived, the team had already stocked it – ready and waiting for his early morning workouts.

“Little things like that mean so much,” he says.

It’s just one of the many reasons he keeps coming back. ^A

For access to expert support and rehab services at the Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane, visit brisbane.spinalhealthyliving.com.au

Take a deep breath

Looking for a gentle way to support both body and mind? Check out the Healthy Living Centre’s new Breathe and Restore group classes. Offered in both chair-based and floor-based formats, the classes promote physical and mental wellbeing through the linking of breath, flow and mindful movement – all at your own pace. Sessions can be funded through NDIS, insurance, or self-funded options.

For more info about all group classes, go to: info.spinal.com.au/inpersongroupclasses



Haley means Business

**Inspired by her experience with Back2Work,
Haley Richardson is building a career helping others rejoin the workforce.**

She's only 21, but Haley Richardson already knows what it feels like to have your life divided into 'before' and 'after'.

A car accident in December 2022 left Haley with an L1 incomplete spinal cord injury and months in hospital learning to walk again. Today, eight surgeries later, she lives with a mostly invisible disability marked by chronic pain, fatigue and the occasional need for a wheelchair or walking aid.

But this is not a story about what Haley lost. It's about what she found.

"After my accident the number-one thing I was scared of was not being able to work or study – both of those things are really important to me," she says. "I wanted to have a purpose again."

While still in the Spinal Injuries Unit at the Princess Alexandra Hospital, Haley met Belinda McLeod, a Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor from Spinal Life's Back2Work team.

"Up until that point I was feeling really disheartened – it felt like my life was going to be on hold for years," Haley admits. "Belinda and the Back2Work team gave me hope. They told me 'yes' when everybody else was saying 'no' or 'wait a bit'. They gave me a way forward when I really needed it."

With the team's support, just six months after her accident, Haley started a new job – at Back2Work!

With almost perfect timing, an administration role covering maternity leave became available, and Belinda believed Haley's lived experience, organisational skills and drive would make her a strong fit. She was right.

"I fell in love with what Back2Work does," Haley says. "I just found it so interesting and it was amazing to see how they could give people a little bit of a normal life again."

She began doing administrative work, but quickly became more involved.

"They encouraged me to ask questions and get involved in discussions," she says. "I was managing referrals, helping

PHOTO

Left: Haley Richardson at Spinal Life's office in Woolloongabba. Photo supplied by JobAccess.

onboard new patients, creating program workbooks. They really valued my ideas.”

At the same time the Back2Work team was helping Haley start her new job, they were also helping her start university life.

“I completed the first trimester of a teaching degree, but it just didn't feel right anymore,” she says.

The accident had changed Haley in more ways than she had realised, and the effect was profound.

“Through my experience with Back2Work, I discovered this whole world of helping people return to work. Seeing other people's success gives me so much joy and I love being able to pass on the help that I was given,” she says.

“My accident and disability have impacted my life in many negative ways, but they've also given me opportunities I never would have had otherwise,” Haley says. “So after that first trimester, when I was really thinking about my future, I realised that if I love something, and I have lived experience in it, **and** it's something that I'm passionate about, I should take the risk and see what happens.”

And so, after lots of advice and encouragement from the team, Haley transferred to a Bachelor of Psychological Science, with plans to complete a Master of Rehabilitation Counselling in 2027.

Back2Work didn't just cheer her on from the sidelines – they helped her navigate university life at Griffith University, from connecting her with the Student Disability and Accessibility team to organising accessible parking, timetable planning and ergonomic equipment.

“Belinda advocated for sit-stand desks, ergonomic chairs in my classrooms, access to assistive technology rooms – things I didn't even know to ask for. It's made such a difference,” says a grateful Haley.

Back in the Spinal Life office, after 18 months with the Back2Work program, Haley's maternity leave position came to an end. But they didn't want to lose her and Haley didn't want to leave – so she transitioned into the Customer Care team, where she now works in reception and administration.

“It's giving me such a great overview of how the whole organisation works,” she says.

Like anyone returning to work after spinal cord injury, attitude alone wasn't enough – practical adjustments were essential. That's where JobAccess was able to help.


The Australian Government program provides funding for work-related equipment for people with a disability or injury.

“The NDIS doesn't cover work-related equipment, so without JobAccess many of our clients simply wouldn't get back to paid work,” says Back2Work Senior Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor, Tania Goossen.

“Haley's spinal cord injury meant that it was really difficult and painful for her to sit for long periods. JobAccess supported her with equipment to help manage her fatigue levels and pain – things like a specialised chair and adaptive tools to reduce bending and strain.”

Equipment like this has made life in the office easier for Haley – as has the support of a truly understanding employer.

“I was so lucky to find a place that would not only give me a chance to work in a new field – but also be so accommodating when it comes to things like physio and medical appointments,” Haley says.

“It's helped me find my purpose,” she says. “The Back2Work team knows that when I finish my master's, I want to come back and join them permanently!” 

Spinal Life's Back2Work project is offered to newly injured patients in the Spinal Injuries Unit at the Princess Alexandra Hospital and other select hospitals, thanks to the support of the Motor Accident Insurance Commission (MAIC). For details, go to: spinal.com.au/back2work; for more about JobAccess visit: jobaccess.gov.au

Help in the 'hood

Spinal Life's Back2Work program has long supported people in hospital plan their return to work or study. Now, the service is expanding into the community.

The team can help you use your funding to identify your strengths and career goals, explore new job or study pathways, and build your confidence and capacity for work. Back2Work can also offer support to employers.

If you're ready for your next chapter, visit: info.spinal.com.au/back2workcommunity or call 1300 774 625.

“It is discrimination”

If you're shocked to learn that support for Australians living with disability is determined by age, not needs, you're not alone – just ask Howard Williams.

When Howard Williams fell four metres while on a holiday in Japan and sustained quadriplegia, neither he nor his wife Lorraine could have imagined the challenges ahead.

That's because the fall came just 16 days after his 65th birthday – which means he's not eligible for the NDIS.

Yes, as extraordinary as that may sound, Australians who acquire a disability after 65 actually receive less support than those who are younger.

“Howard's disability didn't happen because of his age, but turning 65 meant he was automatically excluded from the scheme designed to support people with catastrophic injuries,” says Lorraine.

The age cut-off has had serious and devastating consequences for the Williams family.

Howard now requires 24-hour care and is unable to feed, dress or shower himself without assistance. The cost of that care is enormous – and the help available is minimal.

So what sort of support *is* available for Australians who acquire a disability after the age of 65 and are excluded from the NDIS?

The answer is the Australian Government's new Support at Home program. But this system provides limited, age-focused funding rather than the specialised disability supports required for someone living with a complex spinal cord injury.

In practice, that means older Australians who experience sudden or catastrophic disabilities must navigate a system that simply isn't designed to meet their needs.

As Lorraine explains, the gap is not just financial – it's also about expertise.

“The aged care system is not designed for people with severe spinal cord injuries, and staff are not trained to manage complex disabilities like Howard's,” she says.

And this is not something that's only affecting a few people.

Nearly half of all Australians living with disability are aged 65 and over. They're navigating a system that treats disability differently depending on *when* it occurs – rather than the level of care required.

For many families, that difference can translate into funding gaps of \$25,000–\$50,000 or more each year.

Spinal Life is calling on the Federal Government to review age-based eligibility rules and ensure that all Australians receive the support they need regardless of age, including funding for things like assistive technology, rehabilitation, therapy and complex personal care.

“Disability doesn't end at 65, but the funding does,” says the CEO of Spinal Life, Mark Townend, who acknowledges that the cost doesn't disappear – it just shifts onto families and hospitals.

“People who acquire a disability later in life are forced into a system that simply wasn't designed for their needs. This isn't just unfair; it is discrimination embedded in policy,” says Mark. “Older Australians deserve to live with dignity and independence, regardless of when they acquire a disability. Disability doesn't discriminate – so our policies shouldn't either.” [A](#)

For more details, visit: disabilitydoesntdiscriminate.com.au



Lorraine and Howard Williams

Peer power

Why peer support groups are, ironically, without peer.

For many people living with spinal cord damage, transverse myelitis or the late effects of polio, the journey can feel isolating. That's where peer support groups can make a real difference.

Spinal Life's peer support groups help create a welcoming space for people to connect, ask questions and learn from one another.

At some gatherings you might explore practical topics such as navigating the NDIS, managing health and wellbeing or returning to work. But often, the most valuable moments are the informal conversations between people who truly understand the challenges of life after spinal cord injury. It's all about social connection.

In Cairns, Peer Support Officer Jonas Luetke hosts a monthly catch-up on the first Wednesday of each month.

"We'll often go out for lunch at a café somewhere central," he says. "Everyone just has a chat and checks in on one another – it's a really social thing and it all happens very organically."

Spinal Life's peer support groups meet regularly across Queensland and Western Australia. They're free to join, and new members – as well as family members, partners and carers – are always welcome. **A**

To learn more or sign up for events, visit spinal.com.au/peer-support-groups



Jonas Luetke (in the orange cap) with some of the Cairns Peer Support Group members at one of their monthly catch-ups.

Find an event in your region

Spinal Life Peer Support Groups

Bribie Island:

Wayne Slattery 0449 923 887

Brisbane:

Fred Nitz 0412 190 585

Bundaberg:

Steve Richter 0413 457 284

Cairns:

Jonas Luetke 0437 151 478

Moreton Bay:

Ross Duncan 0475 077 080

Perth:

Lee Thompson or Rollo Craib
08 9449 8621

Rockhampton:

Robynne Clifton 0473 576 107
or Anne Guthrie 0407 116 035

Townsville:

Bianca McDonnell 0428 234 216

Post Polio Groups

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Good night, sleep tight

Sleep after spinal cord injury: why it matters and where to find help.

Sleep is one of the most powerful tools we have for physical health, emotional wellbeing and daily function – yet for many people living with spinal cord injury, a good night's sleep can feel frustratingly out of reach.

Research shows sleep problems are significantly more common after spinal cord injury than in the general population. Insomnia symptoms are frequently reported, and sleep-disordered breathing – including sleep apnoea – also occurs more often after spinal cord injury.

A spinal cord injury can change how the body regulates breathing, muscle tone and nervous system responses during sleep. Weakness in respiratory muscles, medication side effects, pain, spasticity and bladder or bowel routines can all interrupt normal sleep patterns. Many people also experience difficulties regulating body temperature, which can make falling and staying asleep harder.

The impact goes far beyond feeling tired. Poor sleep is linked to reduced concentration, mood changes, increased pain sensitivity and lower overall quality of life. Sleep-disordered breathing, in particular, can contribute to fatigue, cardiovascular risks and reduced daytime function if left untreated.

The encouraging news? Many sleep problems are manageable once identified.

Research is also helping to improve understanding of sleep challenges after spinal cord injury. A recent project led by The Hopkins Centre, in collaboration with Spinal Life and the Queensland Spinal Cord Injuries Service, explored people's lived experiences of sleep disturbances and how they seek help.

Through interviews and co-design workshops, the project identified common barriers to seeking support and developed practical sleep management resources tailored specifically for the spinal cord injury community. These include information sheets, infographics, frequently asked questions and sleep diary tools designed to help people reflect on their sleep patterns and identify possible causes of sleep disruption.

For people experiencing ongoing sleep difficulties, these resources could be a helpful starting point for understanding what may be affecting their sleep – and when to seek further support.

Practical tips for better sleep

1. Consider a sleep assessment

Because symptoms aren't always obvious, sleep apnoea often goes undiagnosed in spinal cord injury. If you experience daytime fatigue, morning headaches or restless sleep, ask your GP or rehabilitation team about a sleep study.

2. Build a consistent routine

Going to bed and waking at the same time each day helps regulate your body clock – even on weekends.

3. Optimise comfort and positioning

Pressure care, mattress choice and positioning supports can reduce pain and overnight awakenings. Occupational therapists can help tailor solutions that are right for you.

4. Manage temperature

Cooling or warming strategies – breathable bedding, cooling vests or temperature-controlled rooms – can make a real difference for people with impaired thermoregulation.

5. Review medications

Some muscle relaxants or pain medications may affect sleep quality. A medication review can sometimes improve rest without changing symptom control.

6. Treat sleep as rehabilitation

Sleep isn't a luxury – it's recovery time. Quality sleep supports immune health, mood, learning, physical rehabilitation and energy for everyday life.

For people living with spinal cord injury, improving sleep isn't just about feeling rested. It's about restoring resilience, independence and wellbeing – one night at a time. **A**

To learn more about this sleep study, go to spinal.com.au/sleep-study; Spinal Life's Nursing team can assist with health and wellness support, including via telehealth. For more, visit: spinal.com.au/nursing



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Out and about in Cairns

Get a taste of Tropical North Queensland between therapy sessions at the Healthy Living Centre in Cairns, with these accessible local adventures.

One of the unexpected perks of visiting the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre in Cairns is its location in the heart of one of Australia's most beautiful regions. Whether you're at the Centre for rehabilitation, respite or a holiday, there's lots to enjoy in the region.

The Centre is just moments from the Cairns Esplanade, where ocean views, shady flat walking paths and the famous lagoon create a relaxed tropical atmosphere right on your doorstep. And beyond the waterfront lies a region packed with accessible adventures – from wildlife encounters and sailing experiences to fishing trips and scenic waterways.

To help visitors make the most of their time in Far North Queensland, the team at the Healthy Living Centre has shared some of their favourite accessible activities nearby.

Here are four great options to add to your Cairns itinerary...

PHOTO

Opposite page, clockwise from far left: Hit the high seas with *Sailability*; explore Trinity Inlet with *Cairns Boat Hire*; go fishing with *Disability Support & Tours QLD*; see crocs at *Hartley's Crocodile Adventures*.

Smooth sailing

Sailability Cairns is a vibrant, volunteer-run program offering safe, inclusive sailing experiences for people with disability. Using specially adapted boats on the calm waters of Trinity Inlet, experienced crew run sessions twice a week (Tuesday and Saturday afternoons) from their base at the Cruising Yacht Squadron. You can learn to sail or enjoy a relaxed cruise aboard the wheelchair-friendly pontoon boat.

The program supports participants' physical and mental wellbeing, and helps you experience freedom and adventure, build confidence, develop new skills, and form new friendships.

Pier pressure

For a relaxed adventure on the water, **Cairns Boat Hire** offers a wheelchair-accessible pontoon boat perfect for exploring the calm waterways of Trinity Inlet. No boat licence is required, and the friendly crew provide a quick briefing before you set off.

Designed with accessibility in mind, the eight-person, wheelchair-friendly vessel is boarded via a wide access ramp. Featuring a shaded canopy and a central console for easy driving, it's a great way to spend a few hours fishing or simply cruising the inlet at your own pace.

Gone fishin'

For anglers of all abilities, **Disability Support & Tours QLD** offers supported fishing adventures around Cairns' beautiful waterways. Led by experienced support workers, the small team provides fully supported outings designed around each participant's interests and goals.

Fishing trips usually take place in the calm waters of Trinity Inlet, using a wheelchair-accessible pontoon boat that can comfortably accommodate two wheelchairs. All fishing gear is provided, including adaptive equipment to help participants cast, reel and land their catch.

Trips range from half-day outings to longer adventures, with the chance to learn new skills such as rigging, filleting and cooking your catch. The team also runs scenic tours, nature photography outings and camping experiences across the Cairns region.

Croc stars

Just 40 minutes north of Cairns along the spectacular Great Barrier Reef Drive, **Hartley's Crocodile Adventures** offers a truly Aussie wildlife experience. Set across 15 hectares of natural wetlands and rainforest, the park is home to crocodiles, koalas, cassowaries and other native wildlife.

Highlights include Hartley's Koala Breakfast, an accessible boat tour and pole-feeding 4.5 metre crocs. A word to the wise: pre-book your favourite experiences ahead of time.

Accessible paths and facilities make exploring the park straightforward, though boarding the boat may require a little care depending on water levels. With plenty to see and do, Hartley's is an easy and rewarding day trip from Cairns. **A**

For access to expert support and rehab services at the Healthy Living Centre in Cairns, visit: spinalhealthyliving.com.au; to book with Sailability Cairns, go to: sailabilitycairns.com.au; to book with Cairns Boat Hire, go to: boathirecairns.com.au; to go fishing with Disability Support & Tours QLD, email: info@disabilitysupporttoursqld.com; for more about Hartley's Crocodile Adventures, visit: crocodileadventures.com

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Note worthy

Whether she's working as a Personal Support Worker or classical musician, Maria Skocka, 33, is always in tune.

My partner, Wojtek (36), and I came to Australia from Poland in 2019 and have been here ever since. We've been together for 13 years – we met when we were studying at the Chopin University of Music in Warsaw (he plays double bass and I play viola). We both graduated with Master of Arts degrees in Instrumental Studies. For many years we were full-time musicians and very committed to our careers, and we just wanted to change our perspective a bit by travelling Down Under for a year or two. But seven years later and we're still here!

When we first arrived, we worked until we had enough for a four-wheel drive and then hit the road. We tried to explore as much as we could and spent four years doing a loop around the entire coast, as well as central Australia.

After a trip home to Poland in 2023, we tried to settle in Brisbane, but we only lasted about six months. Even though we're both from Warsaw, we'd been travelling around remote Australia for so long that we just didn't feel comfortable living in a big city anymore.

3 questions with Maria

Favourite new hiking trail?

"The Thorsborne Trail on Hinchinbrook Island."

Dream venue to perform in?

"The Musikverein, a very old, very famous and very extraordinary concert hall in Vienna, Austria. I actually got to perform there in 2014, so my dream came true already!"

The best piece of advice you'd give to someone thinking about becoming a Personal Support Worker?

"Just be kind. If you've got empathy and a positive approach to life, you're well equipped already."



PHOTO

Top: Maria Skocka and her partner, Wojtek.

Right: Maria with her beloved viola.



By that time I'd started working with Spinal Life. We'd heard about support work from a friend we met on our travels – he used to do it in Perth. It sounded like a really good job, so Wojtek and I decided to give it a go. He's with another company, and I'm a Personal Support Worker at Spinal Life.

I knew Spinal Life had an office in Cairns, so when an opportunity came for us to house-sit for a friend in Kuranda, less than 30km from Cairns, we escaped big-city life and headed north. That was nearly two years ago, and we've been here ever since. After a couple of months house-sitting we rented our own place, a lovely little timber house on the other side of the river from Kuranda, surrounded by rainforest. It's my happy place.

I really like this job – it feels very meaningful. I enjoy building trust and a rapport with a client, and being able to support them with their goals. It gives me satisfaction to be able to help people and bring some good energy. I've worked with the same client since I arrived in Far North Queensland – it's a big responsibility, and I take it seriously.

I work three days a week, as I also need time for my studies and music. I've just completed my Certificate III in Individual Support, and now I'm studying for a Diploma in Community Services. I'm also a freelance musician, and a member of a string quartet called Strings of the North. The classical music scene isn't huge around Cairns, but I play as much as I can.

What else do we get up to up here? Wojtek and I are very outdoorsy people, so we're always hiking or snorkelling or taking a trip to an island. We love to be in nature. And I'm preparing to run my first marathon in July! **A**

For more information about Spinal Life's Personal Support and Home Care Services, call 1300 774 625 or visit spinal.com.au/personalsupport

INDEPENDENCE ON YOUR TERMS



The trajectory of an individual's life can change drastically with the diagnosis of a spinal cord injury (SCI).

The impact can vary from mild weakness and reduced function through to complete paralysis and loss of independence. While the impact of this disability should not be underestimated, there is a great deal that can be done to **improve the quality of life** for individuals living with an SCI. Engagement in a variety of therapies can improve independence, functional capacity and increased participation in enjoyable activities.

Effective allied health input can assist with diet, strength and functional capacity, recommending equipment to improve safety and independence, and working together to achieve goals and quality of life. This may involve exercise and physical participation, or education and advice on what could work best for you. Allied health can also help with the secondary complications of SCI, including loss of range of motion, muscle overactivity, pressure areas or skin breakdown, and bladder and bowel function.

For most people living with an SCI, this isn't new information. The vast majority of survivors have been through allied health rehab while they were in hospital following their initial injury. Unfortunately, a significant number of survivors do not continue with therapies in the community. Overwhelming research shows that engaging in **allied health interventions improves physical function, psychological wellbeing and social participation** compared to those who don't continue rehab.

At Team Rehab Solutions, our team includes physiotherapists, exercise physiologists, occupational therapists, dietitians and speech pathologists. Our clinicians are passionate and experienced in neurological rehab and SCI, collaborating across disciplines to **support you in achieving your goals**.

We see all clients in the community at a location that suits them best. If you or someone you know with an SCI wants to focus more on their wellbeing, our team would love to help work toward a better future. **If you'd like to learn more or chat to our team, you can reach us on 1300 685 046.**



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Client Alan Price
with long-time
VHC support
worker Maraia
Harvey-Hall.

Support for veterans at home

As we mark ANZAC Day and honour those who have served, it's also a reminder that support for veterans continues long after their service ends. Through the Veterans' Home Care (VHC) program, Spinal Life helps eligible veterans, war widows and widowers remain independent at home with services such as cleaning, meal preparation, personal care and community access. Funded by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the program celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2024.

For more information, call 1300 774 625.

You're the voice

People with disability, their families, carers, supporters and those working in the disability sector are invited to take part in the **Voice of Queenslanders with Disability Survey 2026**. It's open now and closes at 5pm on Friday 17 April 2026.

Delivered by Griffith University in partnership with the Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN), the survey gathers lived experience insights to help shape disability policy, services and accessibility across the state.

As Queensland plans for the future – including the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games – these voices will help guide more inclusive planning and reform.

Complete the Voice of Queenslanders with Disability Survey 2026 at:

qdn.org.au/voq-2026

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Tourism training

A new free online training program is helping strengthen Queensland's reputation as a welcoming and inclusive tourism destination – and Spinal Life has played an important role in shaping it.

Delivered by the Queensland Tourism Industry Council (QTIC), the **Queensland Welcomes You** program equips tourism and hospitality staff, event teams, transport providers and volunteers with the skills to deliver warm, inclusive and memorable visitor experiences.

The self-paced course takes around two hours to complete and includes five modules covering world-class hosting principles, storytelling, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, sustainability, local tourism products, and accessibility and inclusion.

“We worked with QTIC to develop the accessible tourism module,” says Dane Cross, who advocates on behalf of Spinal Life and Sporting Wheelies. “We want to make sure *everyone* can experience Queensland's incredible destinations.”

Each training program is tailored to one of Queensland's 13 tourism regions, weaving in local stories, culture and attractions. The program is free and available to anyone involved in welcoming visitors across the state.

For more, go to: qtic.com.au/queensland-welcomes-you



Lagoon life

Join Spinal Life at the Come ‘n’ Try Inclusive Lagoon Day – a free, all-abilities community event featuring accessible activities, inclusive games and lagoon access equipment, including the onsite aquatic wheelchair. Bring your family and friends to the Cairns Esplanade Lagoon from 10am–2pm on Saturday 18 April, and discover local services in a fun and welcoming environment.

For more information, go to:
spinal.com.au/come-and-try-cairns



VR is v.v good

A new virtual reality (VR) research project could help wheelchair users practise safe fall recovery and everyday movement in a completely risk-free environment. Developed by the University of Queensland and NIISQ, the program is being co-designed with people living with spinal cord injury and frontline clinicians. The immersive technology will allow users to practise navigating real-world situations and rebuilding confidence after injury. Backed by NIISQ funding, clinical trials are planned at the Princess Alexandra Hospital from 2027.

To learn more, go to: hivervlab.com/university-of-queensland-virtual-reality-wheelchair



PHOTO

Bill Simpson receiving his Australia Day Award, with (from left) Councillor Alex Givney, Geraldine Simpson (Bill's wife) from Rotary Club of Wynnum & Manly, Merrilyn O'Neill and Christine Garnett from the Scope Club of Wynnum. Photo supplied by Wynnum Manly Ward office.

Hey, True Blue

Through decades of service, Bill Simpson has made a lasting impact on Wynnum.

Bill Simpson, 72, has spent decades making a difference in his community. A Spinal Life Honorary Life Member and former Board Member, as well as a passionate advocate, he was named the 2026 Australia Day Award winner, presented by the Scope Club of Wynnum.

"It was very humbling. I choked up a bit when they rang to tell me," Bill says. The award – for outstanding voluntary services in the community – recognises locals whose time, heart and energy make a real impact. A morning service was held at George Clayton Park on Australia Day, where the thousands of attendees were served 3,500 sausages cooked up by the Rotary Club of Wynnum & Manly.

This is the Rotary Club that inspired Bill's community service. He joined in 2011, after an invitation from his neighbour.

"I went along and saw all the good stuff they do," he says. "They accepted me as a member, and all of a sudden I was Director of Vocational Guidance." He held this role for three years before serving as President in 2019.

Today, Bill continues to lead numerous projects, including

organising guest speakers, documenting club history, and running the Santa Project – a 40-year-old Bayside tradition that sees local businesses display a Santa on their roof to show their support (and Christmas spirit). "I used to sell multi-million-dollar software solutions to councils," he says. "Now I sell \$100 Santas for charity – and let me tell you, selling \$100 Santas is a much tougher gig!"

Bill also founded the Wynnum Wheelchair Challenge to raise awareness of the everyday issues faced by people using wheelchairs in the local area. In collaboration with Spinal Life, participants navigate obstacles like steps and ramps, gaining a firsthand insight into accessibility challenges.

Bill is a tireless advocate beyond Rotary as well. He sits on the Pressure Injury Prevention and Advisory Committee at the Princess Alexandra Hospital, appalled at the \$5.5 billion Australia spends each year on public hospital-acquired pressure injuries. He also works with people in need of help for a wide range of things, including NDIS funding challenges. "I do bits and pieces everywhere," he says.

Born in Wollongong and raised in Sydney, Bill had a long career in information technology and consulting before a 2009 accident left him with T12 incomplete paraplegia. "We parked my Harley over the side of Mount Glorious," he jokes. "I spent six months in hospital – but hey, I won an award for the longest jump on a Harley with a pillion!"

Bill does have some mobility, but relies on a wheelchair. Despite this, he continued to work until his retirement in 2015, and he and his wife Geraldine have travelled extensively, ticking off bucket-list adventures, from New Year's Eve in the Big Apple to piranha fishing in the Amazon.

Looking ahead, Bill plans to slow down a little, but isn't retiring from advocacy. "I'm fighting Queensland Rail at the moment because they're taking away weekend staff at Wynnum station. I'm an advocate; I just can't help myself!" **A**

Be part of the Spinal Life community – become a member at: spinal.com.au/membership

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“It’s just all so nice and easy. I didn’t even have to bring some of my equipment, like a hoist, because they’ve got everything here.”

- Raymond, who has visited the Centre twice, travelling all the way from New Zealand.

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RAYMOND'S REVIEW

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