The Advocate

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

STAND AND DELIVER

Thanks to game-changing adaptive tech, Shem Aitken is back on the fairway

TECH IT OUT

From VR to robotics, discover the $1.8m tech revolution at Brisbane's Healthy Living Centre

Spinal Life AUSTRALIA

Move Mobility has arrived in Mackay!

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MOVE MOBILITY

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Staying connected

Welcome to another issue of *The Advocate*, where we're celebrating the many ways our community is staying active, connected and getting out there.

In this issue, you'll meet adaptive golfer Shem Aitken and follow Charmaine Idris' adventures exploring Mary Cairncross Scenic Reserve in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland. You'll also hear about Sporting Wheelies' growing programs in Cairns and the new multi-million-dollar rehabilitation equipment at our Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane, creating even more opportunities to work towards your health, wellness and independence goals.

We also farewell Chief Advisor – Government, John Mayo, who has retired after more than 32 years with Spinal Life Australia. Since joining us in 1994, John has been a respected and influential advocate for accessibility, equity and inclusion. His work has contributed to significant improvements across accessible transport, housing, infrastructure and disability policy. Generous with his knowledge and deeply committed to our members, John leaves an enduring legacy. On behalf of the Board, I thank him for his remarkable contribution and wish him all the very best for the future.

As we reflect on the 2025–26 financial year, I'm proud of the progress Spinal Life has made despite the significant pressures facing our sector. The Board has remained focused on our financial sustainability and ensuring we are well positioned for the future, while keeping our mission at the heart of our decisions.

Our positive financial result reflects careful management and the hard work of our teams to grow and diversify our services and revenue streams. This includes our investment in Move Mobility, which continues to perform strongly and has recently opened a new showroom in Mackay. At a time of considerable change across the disability sector, we remain committed to sustainable growth across Queensland and Western Australia.

I'd also encourage members to save the date for our 2026 Annual General Meeting, to be held online on Thursday 26 November at 11:00am (AEST). Further information, including the Notice of Meeting, voting instructions and your personalised meeting link, will be sent by Vero Voting in late October.

As always, I welcome your feedback at **chair@spinal.com.au**. Thank you for your continued support, and I hope you enjoy thisissue. 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 do you want to share with members?
The end of the financial year is always a good opportunity to reflect as we prepare our Annual Report.

The past year has brought important achievements alongside significant challenges. Rising costs, workforce pressures and ongoing policy and funding changes continue to reshape the disability sector, but through it all we've remained focused on what matters most – supporting our members and customers to live accessible, equitable and empowered lives.

I'm incredibly proud of what we've achieved together. We delivered almost 5,000 additional hours of Allied Health services compared with the previous year. While Personal Support hours decreased slightly, our teams remained focused on providing high-quality, tailored support.

We've also continued to grow our presence in regional communities, including expanding Peer Support programs in Cairns, Perth and Townsville.

2. What is Spinal Life speaking out about?
Advocacy remains an important part of our work, particularly as significant changes to the NDIS are being considered.

We continue to advocate for a greater focus on addressing administrative inefficiencies within the NDIS, rather than reducing vital supports for participants. The NDIS is an incredibly important scheme, and ensuring its long-term sustainability means improving its administration, accountability and governance.

People with disability should not bear the impact of systemic issues within the scheme. We will continue to speak up for reforms that protect essential supports while ensuring the NDIS delivers timely, effective and participant-centred outcomes.

You can read more about our advocacy on page 26.

3. What's happening with the Healthy Living Precinct in Brisbane?
While we'll continue operating from our current Brisbane site for the next few years, planning is progressing for our new Healthy Living Precinct nearby.

It's an exciting investment in our future and will bring accessible accommodation, health and rehabilitation services, a fitness hub, hydrotherapy pool and community spaces together in one purpose-built location.

The Precinct will create new opportunities to expand the services and supports available to people with spinal cord damage and other physical disabilities, while creating a welcoming place for our community to connect.

4. What else is happening across Spinal Life?
There's plenty happening across regional Queensland, including the recent opening of Move Mobility's new Mackay showroom.

As a co-owner of Move Mobility, we're proud to support its continued expansion and help make quality mobility and assistive equipment easier to access for people in regional communities.

With locations now spanning Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Bundaberg, Rockhampton and Mackay, Move Mobility's growth also creates opportunities for our teams to work together and connect people with the right equipment, services and support.

It's another example of how we're continuing to grow our reach while keeping the needs of our community at the centre of what we do.

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

Know you're in good hands

Our compassionate, highly-trained Personal Support Workers are here to support your independence with dignity, respect and expert care.

Our tailored services include:

- Personal care and grooming
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- Getting out and about
- Medication assistance (eg. diabetes management)
- Complex care
- Bowel therapy and catheter care
- Stoma support
- PEG feeding
- Ventilation assistance.

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spinal.com.au

Spinal Life AUSTRALIA

BACK IN THE SWING

How some seriously cool adaptive tech has reignited Shem Aitken's passion for golf.

PHOTO

From left: With the support of the ParaGolfer, Shem can stand tall and get back to doing what he loves most – playing golf (pictured here at Royal Queensland Golf Club); Shem is right at home on any course.

The first ball went right. Very right. But after more than 20 years away from the fairways, Shem Aitken couldn't have cared less where it landed.

At Parkwood Golf Course on the Gold Coast, with his dad and brother watching from a golf cart nearby, Shem had been strapped into a pioneering piece of equipment called a ParaGolfer. It raised him into a standing position, able to play golf just like in the 'old' days.

"Standing up with a golf club in my hand, looking down at the ball and remembering the last time I played golf, 22 years ago when I was a kid... that moment was absolutely healing," says Shem.

"Yes, the ball sliced off to the right. But it didn't matter. You couldn't wipe the smile off my face!"

That first outing on the ParaGolfer, around five or six years ago, was the beginning of something special for Shem.

"I couldn't believe what I was experiencing," he says. "It was at that moment I knew that golf was going to be a lifelong passion for me."

Shem, 40, has paraplegia following a motor vehicle accident on the Gold Coast in 2004, when he was 18. He shattered three vertebrae and spent 12 months in Brisbane's Princess Alexandra Hospital learning how to do almost everything again.

The accident also claimed the life of his friend who was driving. Another friend involved in the crash became "like a second brother" to Shem, but died from cancer 10 years later, aged just 30.

"It's been a bit rough," Shem says simply. "So you look to little outlets or passions to get you through some of the darker times. Golf has certainly done that for me."

He had tried other adaptive sports over the years, but it was a mutual friend who suggested he contact Ben Tullipan, a survivor of the 2002 Bali Bombings and the Queensland manager of Empower Golf Australia.

It's a charity that helps people with disability experience and participate in golf – whether that means adapting the way the game is played, providing specialist equipment, or simply connecting someone with a coach who understands their needs.

"Empower Golf is basically an inclusive hub for the game of golf in Australia," explains Shem. "It facilitates and promotes golf for Australians of all abilities, so we have blind golfers, amputees, golfers with intellectual disabilities, and people like myself who utilise specialist equipment like the ParaGolfer."

The impact on Shem cannot be overstated.

"Empower Golf completely changed my outlook – not just on sport, but on disability golf, disability in general and my whole life," he says, with quiet conviction. "Being able to hit a ball like I did before my accident was the most amazing, freeing experience. It was a real eye-opener to a new passion."

That passion quickly became serious. Shem now competes in all-abilities championships around Australia with both Empower Golf and Golf Australia. He has enjoyed →

PHOTO

Opposite page, from left: Another beautiful day on the course; With his beloved golden retriever Stanley. This page: Shem credits Empower Golf Australia with opening up a whole new world of opportunities, friendships and experiences.

considerable success – including winning the Queensland title and finishing second in both Tasmania and New South Wales.

But ask him what golf has brought to his life and the trophies and scorecards aren't the first things he mentions.

It's being out in the open, in the fresh air. It's the people he has met. The friendships. The banter. And the simple pleasure of spending a few hours immersed in the game he loves.

"People with disabilities are prone to mental health issues as well, and what the game of golf provides to someone who might be slightly reclusive is the inspiration to get out into the fresh air, into nature, and to enjoy the wind blowing on your face while you hit a little white ball around," he says. "Yes, it can be frustrating from time to time! But that's just the game of golf."

Central to it all is the community he has discovered through all-abilities golf.

> **"I live and breathe motivation and positivity."**
> SHEM AITKEN

"I have become friends with all sorts of people, with all different kinds of disabilities," Shem says. "Everyone has a different story, and we're all happy to tell them, because we're in a safe spot and there's a real sense of shared understanding. And the banter is great! The blind golfers will have a go at the para golfers, and the para golfers will have a go at the blind golfers – there's a real camaraderie. It's just fun."

It's why Shem is so enthusiastic about encouraging complete beginners to pick up a club for the first time.

"I live and breathe motivation and positivity," says Shem. "It's what's got me through the last 22 years, and that's what I experience when I go to these all-abilities championships and interact with like-minded people. That's the most motivating part, and it's why I would encourage everybody to learn how to play – girl, boy, man, woman. It's an amazing and very inclusive sport."

He recommends starting with one of Empower Golf's Come and Try Clinics, where no previous experience is necessary and specialist coaches can help people with a wide range of disabilities find the adaptations or equipment that work for them.

His other big tip? Don't worry too much about whether the ball goes where you intended: "I think it's just about not taking anything too seriously. It's just about being out there and enjoying it."

For Shem, the ParaGolfer has opened the door to a whole new world – but its possibilities extend well beyond the golf course. Its ability to travel across uneven terrain and raise its user into a standing position means people also use the technology to explore outdoor trails, for exercise and even, in some cases, to stand or walk down the aisle at their wedding.

Which is particularly apt for Shem.

Next year, he will marry his partner Nikki, who he met a few years ago while helping with a promotional campaign for his former school, Coomera Anglican College. Shem had been college captain in 2002; years later Nikki contacted him about becoming the face of the College Foundation.

They met while filming the promotional video, had their first date a week later and fell in love almost instantly.

Their relationship has brought another unexpected chapter to Shem's life: becoming part of a family with Nikki's four children, Chloe (20), Jake (19), Lacey (15) and Beau (13). They've made a beautiful home together on Tamborine Mountain – where, coincidentally, Shem's beloved grandparents lived for 30 years – and are currently planning their wedding.

So will Shem be borrowing a ParaGolfer to make his way down the aisle next year?

"I have an incomplete spinal cord injury, which means I didn't sever my spinal cord, I only badly crushed it," he explains. "For many years I had no movement, but in the last two years – since I met Nikki – I've made the most progress when it comes to my mobility. I've actually taught myself to stand and to take a few steps with a walking stick. So it'll definitely be both of us walking down the aisle."

That same determination is evident in every aspect of Shem's life. He drives a car with hand controls and has lived and worked independently across Queensland for the past 20 years.

"There's no holding me back!" he says.

For 22 years, Shem worked in the insurance industry, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. But he has recently embarked on a new chapter, joining community transport organisation TransitCare.

"It's a not-for-profit, and it resonates with me on many levels," he says. "Giving back to the community is a big one for me – I've always been passionate about it, and this is a great way for me to give back, and work with a CEO who is a visionary. I'm looking forward to helping make community transport that much easier for older Australians and people with disabilities."

Whether it's pursuing his passion for golf, encouraging others to give the game a go, or helping make his community more accessible, Shem is always looking for ways to keep moving forward – and to help others do the same.

"Every now and again life throws a bit of a challenge," Shem says. "But most days are very positive, and I focus on those days, not the negative ones. I think that's what's got me through the last 22 years."

That, and perhaps a little golf.

For more information and to find out how you can give golf a go, visit empowergolf.com.au

Shem's shout-out

"While normal golf carts would rip up putting greens, the ParaGolfer is weighted so perfectly and evenly that it puts no more pressure on the ground than a footprint," explains Shem. "It's the only piece of equipment that's Australian Greenskeeper-approved to go on greens. It's a wonderful machine that allows you to play a full round of golf, from tee-off to sinking the final putt. The modern successor to the ParaGolfer – the Paramotion – is also used by Empower Golf. It's obviously newer and the battery life is a lot better, but I still mainly use the ParaGolfer when I play competitions."

Hail Mary

The natural beautyof Mary Cairncross Scenic Reserve on the Sunshine Coast is now more accessible than ever, with a new 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair available for visitors to explore its trails. Charmaine Idristook it for a spin.

PHOTO

Opposite page: Mary Cairncross Scenic Reserve is a jewel in the crown of the Sunshine Coast. Left: Writer Charmaine Idris tests out the Reserve's new beast – a 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair.

There's something refreshing about leaving the city behind, and as my travel companion and I made our way towards the Sunshine Coast, I settled back to enjoy the changing scenery.

Rows of tall pines hugged the road, while the distinctive silhouette of Mount Tibrogargan appeared in the distance. Intermittent showers, low clouds and the last days of autumn added to the atmosphere as we climbed higher, past sweeping green hills and moss-covered embankments shrouded in mist.

Our destination was the Mary Cairncross Scenic Reserve. Just 90 minutes from Brisbane, the 55-hectare sanctuary feels a world away. Located near the lovely town of Maleny, it protects a remnant of subtropical rainforest overlooking the spectacular Glass House Mountains, with walking tracks and boardwalks winding beneath its lush canopy.

The Reserve, supported by the Sunshine Coast Council's Accessibility Fund, has recently introduced a 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair to help more people experience the rainforest and its wildlife up close. Available for visitors to use on the 1.3km Pademelon Loop, it's designed to tackle the uneven surfaces that can make exploring natural environments difficult for wheelchair users.

The car park was already packed when we arrived, but thankfully it wasn't long before an accessible spot became available close to the main entrance, allowing me to transfer easily into my manual wheelchair.

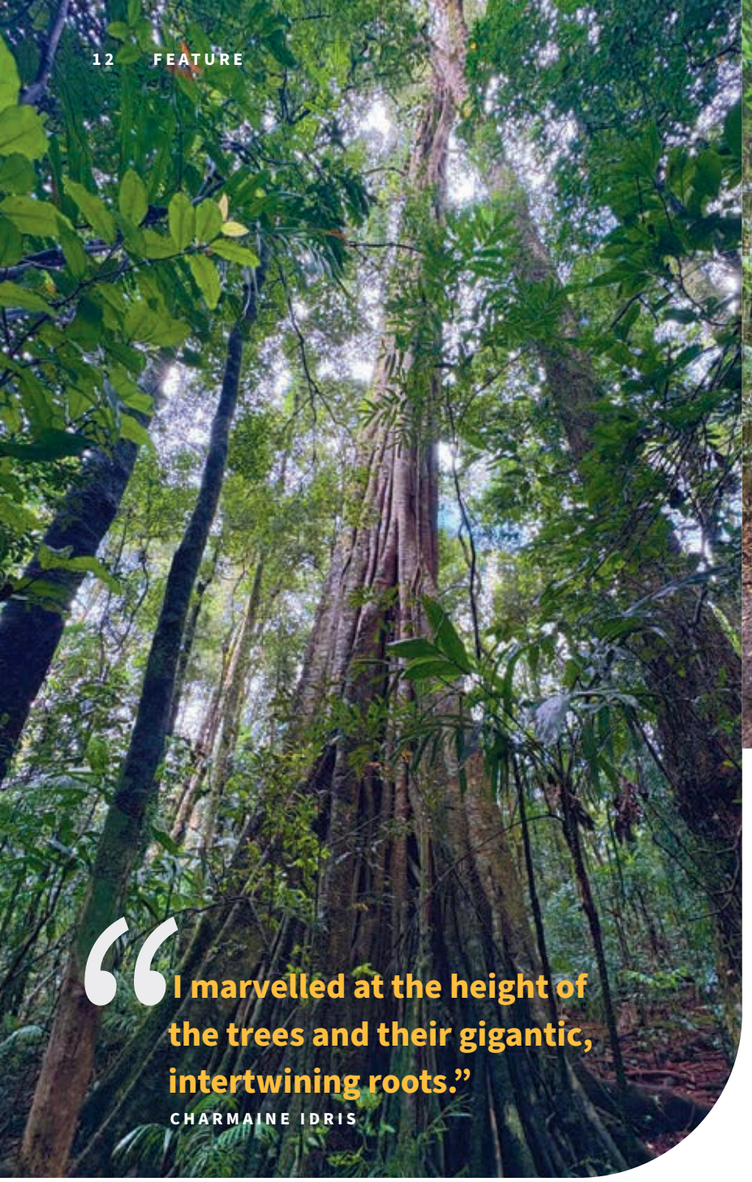
Our first stop was the Rainforest Discovery Centre, where I completed the paperwork needed to hire my much-anticipated 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair.

It was love at first sight.

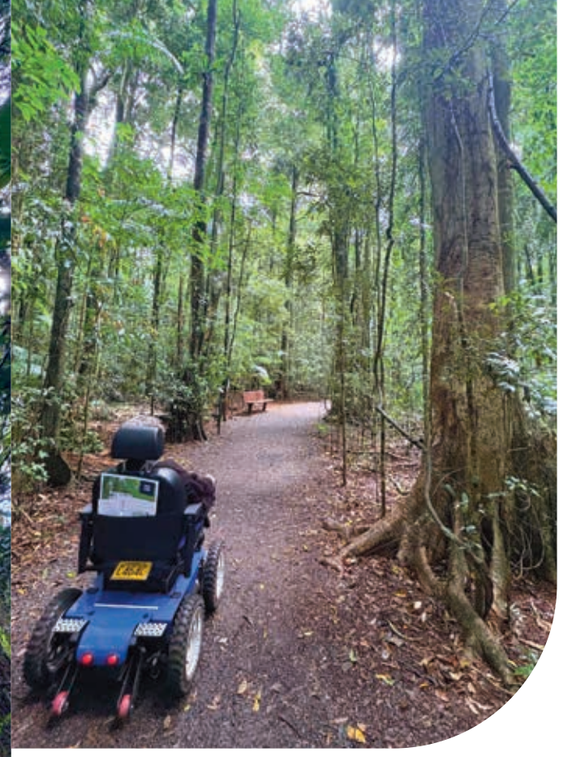
After a brief introduction, I settled into my borrowed wheels and headed outside, armed with a map, mosquito repellent and a reminder to watch out for leeches.

The 1.3km Pademelon Loop was our testing ground – and it didn't take long to discover exactly what my new set of wheels could do.

The all-terrain wheelchair is a beast. Mud, puddles, roots, uneven ground – it conquered them all with ease. →



> **“I marvelled at the height of the trees and their gigantic, intertwining roots.”**
> CHARMAINE IDRIS



PHOTO

This page, L–R: The Pademelon Loop winds through 1.3km of lush subtropical rainforest; Charmaine takes on the Loop in the 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair. Opposite page: Charmaine’s favourite display in the Rainforest Discovery Centre brings the Reserve’s birdlife – and birdsong – to life.

I was beyond impressed with how it handled the rugged terrain as we made our way along the trail.

The comfortable seat and easy steering were bonuses. Although the footplate was a little low for this petite wheelchair user, with some rearranging I managed to get my feet comfortable enough.

At first, I had the speed dial set to super slow. But as my confidence grew, so did my speed – mindful, of course, of the other people sharing the trail.

The Pademelon Loop is a hive of eco activity, with an abundance of animal and plant life thriving here. I marvelled at the height of the trees and their gigantic, intertwining roots, while interpretive signs along the way revealed more about these ancient giants and the rainforest’s other flora and fauna. Helpfully, the information was positioned at wheelchair eye level.

Then there were the sounds, the lush greenery and the sheer tranquillity of being surrounded by rainforest. This was exactly the communion with nature I had come looking for.

Consider it official: the internet and mobile phones are no match for Mother Nature.

Eventually, after an expertly executed 360-degree turn, we headed back – a little faster this time – to the Discovery Centre. I grudgingly bade farewell to my love-at-first-sight 4x4 wheelchair and transferred back into my own chariot of fire.

There was still plenty to explore.

The Rainforest Discovery Centre is filled with information about the Reserve, with friendly volunteers on hand to answer questions and interactive displays bringing the rainforest to life.

One display that immediately caught my attention featured the Reserve’s birdlife. From my wheelchair, I could easily reach buttons beneath the different species and, with a press, hear each bird’s distinctive call.

The wheelchair-accessible Dusk to Dawn display offered another perspective on life in the Reserve. In a darkened room, footage and sounds reveal what happens in the rainforest after nightfall, from a sudden downpour to encounters with local wildlife, including the pademelon – a small relative of the kangaroo and wallaby, after which the Pademelon Loop is named.

Next, we headed to the viewing deck beside the café, reached by a lift that was just large enough for me, my wheelchair and my companion.

And what a reward awaited us.

From the deck, the Glass House Mountains, veiled in mist, looked spectacular. Interpretive signs provided more information about the landscape and were positioned so I could read them easily from my wheelchair.

A short bridge from the viewing deck leads to the upper level of the Discovery Centre and the elevated Glider Gallery, a 150m boardwalk that descends through the rainforest mid-storey.

Naturally, I had to put it to the test.

Partway down, I launched into an exhilarating hands-free wheelchair sprint. It was a huge adrenaline rush – and a fitting way to finish an adventurous and uplifting day.

I had come to Mary Cairncross wanting to immerse myself in nature, away from the incessant white noise of phones and the internet. Thanks to the all-terrain wheelchair, I was able to do exactly that.

And that is a gift I’ll cherish. Ⓐ

For more information and bookings, go to:
mary-cairncross.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au

Need to know

THE All-TERRAIN WHEELCHAIR

• The Observer Aussie Bush 4x4 All-Terrain Wheelchair is suitable for adults and children who can safely operate it • 18-inch seat • Right-hand controller • Folding footplate • Front, drive and rear-wheel suspension • No seat belt

HIRING

• One hire per day, 10am–2pm • Pademelon Circuit (1.3km) only • Book ahead by phone or email • Conditions of Use Agreement required

MARY CAIRNCROSS SCENIC RESERVE

GETTING AROUND

• Mostly flat terrain, suitable for mobility devices

ACCESSIBLE PARKING

• Two accessible parking bays about 90m from the Discovery Centre • Short-term accessible parking near the Discovery Centre may be used if accessible bays are unavailable

ACCESSIBLE BATHROOMS

• Large accessible bathroom with wide door • Right-hand handrail • Accessible sink with water/dryer combination

Next-level REHAB

From robotic rehab to real-time feedback, the Healthy Living Centre's new high-tech equipment is helping clients move, practise and progress in new ways

Photos: Stephen Lawrence

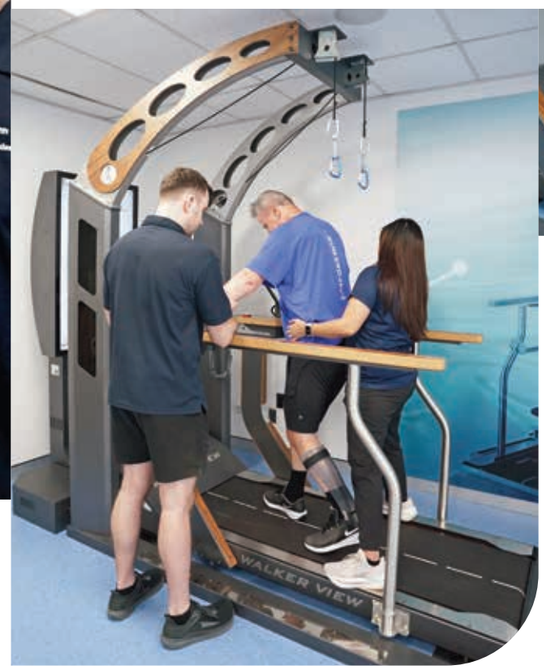
There's some serious new tech at Spinal Life's Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane – with $1.8 million worth of advanced rehabilitation equipment opening up exciting new possibilities for people with spinal cord injury, acquired brain injury and other neurological conditions.

From robotics and virtual reality to Functional Electrical Stimulation (FES), artificial intelligence and gamification, the technology is designed to support everything from upper and lower limb rehabilitation to balance, posture, gait and functional independence. The impressive line-up includes the WalkerView treadmill, cycling and stepping trainers, and equipment that turns rehabilitation exercises into interactive, engaging experiences.

The new equipment has arrived at the Healthy Living Centre through Spinal Life's collaboration with the Accelerated Recovery Centre (ARC), significantly expanding access to advanced rehabilitation technology in the community. Together, the organisations are also developing intensive multidisciplinary programs focused on neuroplasticity – the nervous system's ability to adapt and reorganise following injury or illness.

Combined with Spinal Life's existing physiotherapy, exercise physiology, occupational therapy, community nursing and other allied health services, the technology is helping establish the Brisbane Healthy Living Centre as a leading destination for advanced neurorehabilitation, research and innovation.

We got Spinal Life member Ralph Shreeve to show us some of the new equipment. →



PHOTO

Opposite page: Spinal Life client Ralph Shreeve tests out the ProKin with Physiotherapist Grace Gonzales-Pinkerton and QUT Exercise Physiology student Daniel Humphrey. This page: Some of the new, truly high-tech equipment in the Brisbane Healthy Living Centre.

> **"These machines are a great asset to the Healthy Living Centre and have made a positive contribution to my rehab."**
>
> **RALPH SHREEVE**

WALKERVIEW

Meet the machine

It may look like a treadmill, but WalkerView is watching while you walk. The high-tech system analyses gait in real time, giving the Healthy Living Centre team detailed information about how you move while you get on with the business of moving.

See yourself improve

A screen provides visual feedback while you walk, helping you respond to what your body is doing there and then. The treadmill can also adapt its speed to the user, allowing training to be tailored to individual ability and progress.

PROKIN

Finding your balance

Balance involves far more than simply staying upright. ProKin is a high-tech platform designed to assess and train proprioception – a.k.a your body's ability to sense where it is and how it's moving.

Small moves, big information

As you shift your weight and respond to exercises, sensitive technology measures what's happening beneath your feet. That can reveal details about balance, stability and movement control that aren't always obvious to the naked eye – and gives therapists objective information to help tailor your training. →

DIEGO

Take a load off

Moving an arm against gravity can be a huge challenge when strength or movement is limited. Diego helps by taking some of the arm's weight – providing just enough support to make movement possible while still allowing the user to do the work they can.

Reach a little further

The system supports three-dimensional arm and shoulder movement and can be used with one or both arms. Importantly, it can also accommodate people seated in manual or power wheelchairs.

Access all areas

WHO IS IT FOR?

The new rehabilitation equipment at the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane can support people with spinal cord damage, acquired brain injury and other neurological conditions.

The technology can be incorporated into individual rehabilitation programs to target areas including mobility, strength, balance, posture, gait and upper and lower limb function.

HOW TO ACCESS IT

Talk to the Healthy Living Centre team about your rehabilitation goals and which equipment and services may be suitable for you.

To find out more, go to:
brisbane.spinalhealthyliving.com.au

AMADEO

Meet the machine

This robotic system is all about the hand. Amadeo can help guide precise movements of the fingers and thumb, either individually or together, and can be used even when someone has very little – or no – grasp function.

Repetition, repetition

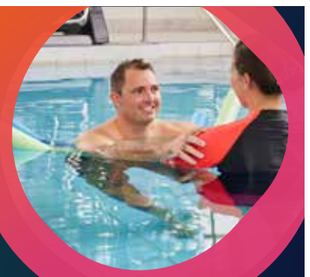
Here's the impressive bit: Amadeo can enable up to 700 finger and hand movements in one session. It can provide assistance where needed while also detecting active effort, allowing the challenge to change with the person using it. Ⓐ

Experience the benefits of hydrotherapy

Rehabilitation and exercise in a warm, accessible pool
- Improve strength and mobility
- Support balance and coordination
- Reduce pain and stiffness
- Build confidence with movement

Book today – call 1300 774 625!

Hydrotherapy is available at locations across Brisbane with Spinal Life and Sporting Wheelies therapists.



Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre

Discover a place for health, wellness and greater independence at our Brisbane Healthy Living Centre

"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."

– Tim, regular customer

Our multidisciplinary team brings together therapy, adaptive fitness and support in one accessible location.

We can support you with:
- Exercise Physiology
- Physiotherapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Community Nursing
- Allied Health Assistants
- Group Classes and Clinics
- Personal Support

Access our adaptive fitness hub and book a hydrotherapy session at a nearby pool with one of our experienced therapists.

Whatever your goals, our team will work with you to help you get the most out of everyday life.

Call 1300 774 625
enquiries@spinal.com.au
brisbane.spinalhealthyliving.com.au

Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre

A lesson in EMPATHY

Sporting Wheelies has helped eight-year-old Conan Marson rediscover his love of sport – and given his classmates a new understanding of life on wheels.

Photos: Stephen Lawrence

When Conan Marson told his mum his back was sore one Thursday night last November, there was little to suggest anything was seriously wrong.

The seven-year-old said he had fallen earlier that day, but there was no bruising or swelling and, after some pain relief, he slept through the night.

The next morning was very different.

"He's a very active child, so when he didn't hop out of bed, I was a bit concerned as it was so unlike him," mum Dominique recalls. "I went into his room and said, 'You good, buddy?'"

His response stopped her in her tracks: "No, Mum, I can't feel my legs."

In less than 12 hours, Conan had lost complete sensation from the waist down.

Conan, now eight, was diagnosed with transverse myelitis, an inflammation of the spinal cord. After five days of steroid treatment and five rounds of plasma exchange failed to restore his mobility, he spent 84 days at Queensland Children's Hospital undergoing treatment and rehabilitation.

His transverse myelitis remains idiopathic, meaning no underlying cause has been identified.

Now home and living with T8 paraplegia, Conan attends physiotherapy three times a week, while his family waits to see what the future might hold.

But for a boy who had rarely stopped moving before his diagnosis, finding new and enjoyable ways to stay active was also important.

"He's not an inside kid," Dominique says. "Any time he could be outside riding his bike, scooter or kicking a ball – he loves his rugby league – he was there. He was a really active kid."

PHOTO

Opposite page, clockwise from far left: Conan gets into the action during the Raising the Bar school visit; Sporting Wheelies' Game Changers share their skills with Conan and his classmates; Conan at home on the court.

After Conan returned home from hospital in February, the family began looking for ways to bring some of that activity back into his life.

Through Spinal Life, they discovered Sporting Wheelies.

"We went in one Saturday and Conan gave it a go," says Dominique. "He absolutely loved it – and he's been back every week since."

Conan joined Para Squad, Sporting Wheelies' multi-sport program for children aged seven to 13 (there's also a Para Squad for teenagers), where participants can try a different adaptive sport each week. Over two terms, he has tackled everything from Wheelchair Cricket, Boccia and Basketball to Adaptive Skateboarding.

"He just loves being in a room with people who are in similar situations, or understand what he's going through," Dominique says. "He loves being in that community and hanging out with people who don't treat him differently. He's formed some lovely friendships."

That sense of belonging became particularly important when Conan returned to school in April.

Classmates were curious about why he was using a wheelchair, and questions such as "Why don't you just get up and walk?" became difficult to navigate.

Dominique encouraged her son to set his own boundaries and tell other children when he didn't want to talk about his condition, but the family felt they needed more help.

Spinal Life suggested bringing Sporting Wheelies to the school through its Raising the Bar program, presented by Game Changers – people with disability who play sports and share their lived experience with students and staff.

Soon, every Year 3 student at Conan's school had the chance to try using a wheelchair and playing Wheelchair Basketball.

"It was the best thing Spinal Life and Sporting Wheelies could have done for us," Dominique says.

"Conan was only supposed to be down there for an hour with his class, but he ended up staying for four and a half hours. He stayed the whole time. He loved it."

For his classmates, the experience offered a very different perspective on something Conan now does every day.

"I think it gave them an insight into how much strength it takes and all of the new skills you need to learn to navigate a chair," says Dominique.

More importantly, she has noticed a change since the visit: "The kids have been a lot more receptive with Conan and a lot more understanding, which has been really helpful. And I think it's also given him the confidence to just be himself and go, 'Yeah, this is how I am.'"

Almost a year after the morning that changed their lives, the Marsons still have no definitive answers about Conan's future. New scans are planned for November and, for now, the family is concentrating on therapy – and taking things one day at a time.

Sport, however, is firmly back in Conan's life, and Dominique hopes other families facing a similar upheaval will give Sporting Wheelies a try.

"If your child is struggling with finding their way in their new life, even just boosting their confidence and helping them get comfortable being in a chair makes such a difference," she says.

"It's been amazing for Conan. We're honestly so grateful that Sporting Wheelies exists."

For more about Sporting Wheelies: sportingwheelies.org.au

Raising the Bar

Sporting Wheelies' Raising the Bar program brings inclusive sport into schools, giving students with and without disability the chance to try Wheelchair Basketball, Wheelchair Rugby, Goalball and Boccia.

Sessions are led by Sporting Wheelies' Game Changers – people with disability who share their lived experience while helping students build teamwork, understanding and empathy through sport.

Programs can be tailored to different ages, abilities and learning needs. Find out more at: sportingwheelies.org.au/schools

Game on, Cairns

Five adaptive sports, two locations and plenty of ways to get involved – Sporting Wheelies is bringing even more sporting opportunities to Far North Queensland.

Cairns' growing disability sports community has just received a major boost, thanks to Sporting Wheelies launching a new Cairns Hub on 12 October.

Five adaptive sports are now on offer across two Cairns locations, giving people with disability the chance to get active, learn new skills and discover a sport they love.

The program includes Para Powerlifting, Adaptive Aquatics, Wheelchair Fundamentals, Table Tennis and Boccia, with sessions held at the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre in Cairns North and PCYC Cairns in Manunda.

And there's no need to arrive with sporting experience – or even know which activity you want to try.

Wheelchair Fundamentals provides an introduction to skills including pushing, turning, stopping and positioning, while table tennis offers a fast and social option that can be played seated or standing. Boccia combines precision and tactics, with ramps and assistive equipment available, while Para Powerlifting caters for everyone from those lifting for fitness to athletes interested in competition.

At the Healthy Living Centre, Adaptive Aquatics offers another way to get moving, with one-on-one sessions in the on-site hydrotherapy pool tailored to individual goals, including water safety and learning to swim.

Experienced coaches are on hand to help newcomers learn the basics and build confidence at their own pace, with sport chairs and adaptive equipment available where needed.

Best of all, there's no pressure to commit immediately. New participants can try two sessions free before deciding whether they'd like to continue. Ⓐ

To find out more about the new Sporting Wheelies hub in Cairns and register for upcoming sessions, visit sportingwheelies.org.au

Four for one

An introductory $80 term fee at Sporting Wheelies' new Cairns Hub gives participants access to Para Powerlifting, Wheelchair Fundamentals, Table Tennis and Boccia from October to December – so you can try more than one.

Adaptive Aquatics is also offered at an introductory rate of $160 for the term, while an annual Sporting Wheelies membership of $55 applies.

New participants can try two sessions free before signing up.

PHOTO

Sporting Wheelies' new Cairns Hub offers five adaptive sports across two locations.

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*Excludes Adaptive Aquatics

PHOTO

Justin Hua [front], with [from left] his parents Lee and Kuh, and Josh Smith from Chapter 1 Employment.

Making it work

After years wondering what work might look like after his spinal cord injury, Justin Hua found the skills, confidence and connections to get started.

For Justin Hua, returning to work wasn't simply a matter of dusting off the résumé.

Justin was 19 and in the second year of an apprenticeship as a mechanic when he sustained quadriplegia in a car accident in 2014.

"It took me ages to figure things out. I didn't know what the hell I was going to do," says Justin, now 31. "I think I was down in the dumps for about two years, and after that I was just trying to get into a stable everyday routine."

The motivation to think about going back to work came quite a bit later. And Justin's unlikely inspiration? His young support workers.

"Watching them come and go, and head off to uni and plan their careers – it made me think, 'What's to say I can't start doing stuff myself?'" Justin recalls. "Luckily I had good support from my Spinal Life team, my parents and my brother Wil, who was also injured in the accident and lives with quadriplegia, although he has some use of his arms. They all helped motivate me and got me through my self-doubt. Eventually, I was like, 'Yeah, it's time to do something'."

He began with an adult tertiary preparation course at TAFE, before considering everything from coding and 3D modelling to accounting and law. "They just weren't for me," he says.

"I started thinking about what could I do that's not too physical, and then something clicked: counselling," he says. "I thought, it's mostly listening, and I can listen. Hopefully, I can remember things too!"

By the end of 2024, Justin had completed a two-year online Diploma of Counselling. But turning that qualification into employment proved another challenge when he discovered his course was not accredited by the relevant professional bodies.

So he changed tack. Enter Spinal Life's Back2Work program.

Justin had been connected with Spinal Life for many years when his team mentioned a new course being offered by Back2Work. Designed to help people with spinal cord damage prepare to return to the workforce, the six-week Ready2Work program seemed a good fit.

Initially, he wasn't exactly enthusiastic.

"I was really reluctant because it was two days a week for six weeks, and the early starts interrupted my morning routine," he laughs. "But with a gentle nudge from my Support Coordinator, I went – and I stayed for the entire program."

Through guest speakers, practical advice and other participants with lived experience, Justin learned more about interviews, workplace conversations and what returning to work could involve. Just as importantly, Back2Work connected him with disability employment services that could help turn preparation into opportunity.

Among the presenters was Josh from Chapter 1 Employment, an organisation specialising in inclusive employment services. That introduction proved pivotal, ultimately leading Justin to the Lovewell Foundation.

"It's an organisation that supports women from vulnerable backgrounds with training and employment opportunities to help them rebuild their lives," Justin explains. "They've also got a café at the top of Mount Gravatt, which helps fund the organisation's work."

Justin began working from home for the Foundation for 10 hours a week as a data entry administration assistant and has since become a communications officer.

The work is nothing if not varied. He has tackled databases, updated café menus in Canva, learnt new software, worked on invoicing and end-of-month reporting and, most recently, begun researching policies and procedures for the organisation's board.

"They give me plenty of time, plenty of support," he says. "It's a great opportunity just to learn and try different things and build up that experience."

There have been other milestones along the way. Justin was a finalist in the 2025 Queensland Training Awards' Equity Student of the Year category and, just as this magazine was going to print, was named Team Member of the Month at the Lovewell Foundation.

Back2Work's support hasn't disappeared now that Justin is employed, either. The team still checks in and has helped him explore options as he considers whether counselling might also form part of his working future.

For now, his plan is characteristically straightforward.

"Don't get complacent. Don't get lazy. Just keep the ball rolling. Keep reaching. Keep trying different things."

And after a long time wondering what came next, work has brought something perhaps even more valuable than a job title.

"I feel good," Justin says. "Feeling like I was wasting my time used to weigh on me, but now I'm doing stuff that's productive. I'm pretty happy with myself." Ⓐ

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 more, go to: spinal.com.au/back2work. The Back2Work program also offers ongoing employment support for people living in the community – learn more at: spinal.com.au/back2workcommunity. For more about Chapter 1 Employment, visit: chapter1employment.com.au

Ready and willing

The Spinal Life Ready2Work program helps people with a spinal cord injury get prepared for work, study and/or volunteering. The next six-week program, held in Brisbane on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, starts on Tuesday 20 October, with more programs set for 2027. They're completely free – morning tea and lunch are even supplied! This training is proudly funded by the Queensland Government through its Skilling Queenslanders for Work initiative. Find out more at: **info.spinal.com.au/readytowork**

When catheterisation starts to feel different: why comfort deserves attention

Menopause can change the way your body feels, including during intermittent catheterisation. If dryness, sensitivity or resistance has crept into your routine, it may be time to talk about comfort differently.

Meet **Paris Purnell** who is a Senior Manager, Global Clinical Education at Hollister. He helps women speak openly about bladder care, especially when something familiar begins to feel uncomfortable or uncertain.

His message is simple: you do not have to accept dryness, stinging or resistance in silence. With the right support, technique and catheter choice, your routine may feel easier again.

For many women living with spinal cord injury, intermittent self-catheterisation is part of daily life. So when it begins to feel different (drier, more sensitive or harder to manage) it can be unsettling. You might wonder whether your technique has changed, or whether you simply need to tolerate it. You don't.

Menopause can affect more than periods and hot flushes. As oestrogen falls, tissues around the vagina and urethra may become thinner, drier, less elastic and more sensitive. This is often called genitourinary syndrome of menopause, or GSM. For women who catheterise, it may mean extra friction, minor spotting, irritation or less confidence in a once-straightforward routine.

Spinal cord injury can add another layer. Changes in sensation, hand function, spasticity, transfers or positioning may already influence catheterisation. Add menopausal tissue changes, and the right clinical support, technique and catheter choice can make a meaningful difference.

Infyna Chic™ intermittent catheters may be one option to discuss with your healthcare professional. Designed for women, these ready-to-use intermittent catheters feature HydraBalance™ Lubricating Technology, a hydrophilic coating and hydration fluid that create a smooth cushion as the catheter contacts the urethra. This lasting lubricity may help reduce friction when tissues feel dry or sensitive.

Comfort is about everyday confidence, too. Infyna Chic™ has a discreet, compact case, a flip-top cap for easier handling and a resealable case when immediate disposal isn't possible. These thoughtful features may help when dexterity, fatigue, transfers, privacy or catheterising away from home are part of your day.

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Of course, a catheter cannot diagnose or treat GSM, infection or other causes of pain. New or persistent burning, bleeding, repeated difficulty inserting, fever, cloudy urine, pelvic pain or autonomic symptoms should be discussed with a healthcare professional. A continence nurse, GP, spinal service or menopause clinician can help assess what is happening and talk through options.

Your bladder-care routine should support your body through every stage of life. If catheterisation has begun to feel different, start the conversation. Ask your healthcare professional whether Infyna Chic™ may suit your needs and request a demonstration or product trial where available.

Scan QR code to learn more or visit hollister.com.au/infynachic

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Physical comfort: easy and convenient with HydraBalance™ Lubricating Technology.[4-6]
Emotional comfort: overcoming barriers like fear and embarrassment.[5,7]

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To experience Infyna Chic, call our Customer Care team 1800 880 851.

References: 1. Hollister Data on file, 2021, 2023. 2. European Association of Urology Nurses (EAUN), Evidence-based Guidelines for Best Practice in Urological Health Care - Urethral Intermittent Catheterisation in Adults Including Urethral Intermittent Dilation (2024). Hollister Data on file, TR-00825, 2025. 3. Hollister Data on file, ref-03340, 2023; n=275, Infyna Chic™ End User Survey. 4. Hollister Data on file, 2018. 5. Hollister Data on file, 2019. 6. Hollister Data on file, 2020. 7. Hollister Data on file, 2021, 2022, 2023. Prior to use of Infyna Chic™ catheters, be sure to read the Instructions for Use for information regarding Intended Use, Contraindications, Warnings, Precautions, and Instructions. Hollister, the Hollister logo, HydraBalance, the HydraBalance logo, Infyna Chic are trademarks of Hollister Incorporated. All other trademarks and copyrights are the property of their respective owners. © 2026 Hollister Incorporated. AUHC446 May 2026.

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Start comfortable. Stay confident.

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Making a difference in the journey of life.

Fix the system

PHOTO

Spinal Life is calling on the Federal Government to prioritise administrative reform of the NDIS.

As debate continues over the future cost and sustainability of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), Spinal Life says the search for savings should start with the way the scheme is administered – not with the supports people with disability rely on.

The organisation recently welcomed the final report and recommendations for the Senate inquiry into proposed NDIS amendments, saying greater scrutiny is essential as decisions are made about the scheme's future.

Spinal Life CEO Mark Townend told media the NDIS remains an important scheme worthy of strong public support, but ongoing administrative inefficiencies are undermining confidence in it.

"The NDIS is a great scheme and one that should be supported by all Australians. But its long-term sustainability and public confidence are being undermined by ongoing administrative inefficiencies.

"The NDIS has now been operating for more than a decade, yet many of the implementation and administrative challenges identified during its early years remain unresolved."

Mark says even modest improvements could produce substantial savings without reducing essential supports.

"We need to recognise the scale of the opportunity here. If even 10 per cent of the current inefficiency in administering the scheme could be eliminated, that could represent a saving of approximately $5.2 billion. That is a significant amount of money that could be retained within the scheme, directed towards participants and services, or returned to taxpayers, without simply reducing the essential supports people with disability rely on."

Greater transparency around NDIS spending is also needed, he says, along with stronger governance, oversight and accountability.

"Public money should be delivering public value. If funds are being diverted through unnecessary administrative costs or leaving Australia through the ownership structures of businesses operating within the scheme, Australians deserve to understand why and what safeguards are in place."

With greater use of algorithmic decision-making also planned within the NDIS, Mark says new systems must be carefully monitored to ensure people with complex needs are not disadvantaged. Used well, however, technology could also help streamline processes and reduce duplication.

Ultimately, he says participants should not pay the price for problems within the system itself.

"The NDIS deserves to be protected, but protecting it means reforming the way it is administered. Participants should not bear the burden of systemic shortcomings that have remained unaddressed for more than a decade. Those responsible for administering the scheme must be held accountable for delivering timely, effective and participant-centred outcomes."

For more information about Spinal Life's advocacy efforts, visit spinal.com.au or follow us on Facebook

Who supports the family?

When someone sustains a spinal cord injury, the people who love them need support too.

A spinal cord injury can change life in an instant – not only for the person who sustains it, but for everyone closest to them.

In those early days, family members are dealing with their own shock and uncertainty, while trying to understand what's happening and work out how best to support someone they love. Their lives have changed too.

"In those really early stages, the Peer Support team is often spending a lot more time with family than we are the actual person who's had the injury," says Katie Hammond, Team Leader – Peer Support at Spinal Life. "We're just helping bring them up to speed."

For families, that can mean helping them understand unfamiliar medical language, what's important right now and what happens next.

It's a time of enormous change, and there's so much information for family members to take in – but zero expectation from the Peer Support team that it will all be absorbed the first time around (or even the second, third or tenth times).

"We understand that nobody is remembering anything, because everyone is in a state of shock," says Katie. "It doesn't matter how many times you ask us, we'll give it to you like it's the first time you're hearing it. We try to be clear, concise and kind – always."

Peer Support also helps families navigate something less tangible: how to help.

"Family members have no idea what to do at the start, but they're going in there with the best intentions," says Katie. "We help them navigate what those intentions are and how they're going to land, so they're doing what's best for their family member."

Katie Hammond (front) and some of the amazing Peer Support team.

And that support doesn't have to end when someone leaves hospital. Peer Support can continue to provide information, reassurance and simply someone who understands. Because when life changes after a spinal cord injury, nobody should have to work it all out alone.

For more details, visit spinal.com.au/peer-support-groups

Find an event in your region

Spinal Life Peer Support Groups

Bribie Island:
Wayne Slattery 0449 923 887
Brisbane:
Katie Hammond 1300 774 625
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
Townsville:
Bianca McDonnell 0428 234 216

Post Polio Groups

Cairns:
Joy Hay 4055 5795
Gold Coast:
Lyn Glover 0448 206 856
Sunshine Coast:
Cathy Newman 0439 775 464
or Noel Allen 0427 148 724

Transverse Myelitis Group

Ross Duncan 0475 077 080

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Top fun

Thinking of taking on a fun run? Whether you walk, run or roll, a little preparation can help you reach the finish line safely – and enjoy the journey.

The recent Bridge to Brisbane, Queensland's largest annual community fun run, inspired Spinal Life Exercise Physiologist Ernest Starowicz to put together some practical advice for members keen to tackle a fun run of their own.

From major city events to local community challenges, fun runs can be a great way to get active, set yourself a goal and experience the buzz of crossing a finish line – and you certainly don't have to be an elite athlete to take part.

Whether you're walking, running, using a manual or power wheelchair or mobility aid, the key is choosing an event that works for you – and giving yourself plenty of time to prepare.

Start small

If 5km is your goal, don't make event day the first time you tackle the distance. Build your training gradually over several weeks (Ernest recommends eight weeks), increasing the length and duration of sessions as your fitness improves. Consistency is more useful than squeezing in occasional hard sessions, and if your chosen course includes hills, make sure some of your training does too. Strength work can also help. For manual wheelchair users, that might include exercises targeting the rotator cuff, shoulders, upper back, core, triceps and grip strength. People walking the course may benefit from exercises such as sit-to-stands, step-ups, calf raises and hip strengthening.

Get your gear ready

Your body isn't the only thing that needs preparing. Before event day, check your equipment is in good working order. For wheelchair users, that includes tyres, brakes, bearings and cushions, as well as making sure any power-assist devices are charged. Pack gloves, water, medications and anything you might need for minor repairs. For walkers, comfortable, supportive footwear is essential – but race day is definitely not the time to break in a new pair!

Fuel the fun

Stick with familiar foods in the lead-up to your event and start the day with a balanced breakfast you know agrees with you. Make sure you're well hydrated before you begin, have a plan for fluids (and snacks) along the way and replenish them afterwards. Most importantly, practise your food and hydration strategy during training rather than experimenting on event day. Afterwards, aim to eat a balanced meal containing a source of protein as well as carbohydrates within one to two hours of your fun run.

Watch the weather

Check the forecast and prepare for the conditions, whether that means sunscreen and a hat, or taking extra care in wet weather. Rain can make surfaces slippery and increase stopping distances, while wet push rims can reduce grip for wheelchair users, so don't forget those gloves. And let's be clear: Australia = SPF 50 sunscreen **every** day.

Go at your pace

On event day, warm up gently and resist the temptation to fly off the starting line with everyone else. Pace yourself, listen to your body and stop for a rest if you need one. Because success isn't determined by speed. As Ernest advises, the goal is to arrive prepared, pace yourself appropriately and finish safely and confidently. And – most importantly – to enjoy the experience. Ⓐ

Want one of Spinal Life's Exercise Physiologists or Physiotherapists to design a dedicated fun run training program for you? Go to spinal.com.au or call 1300 774 625 to book an appointment. Can't wait until the 2027 Bridge to Brisbane? Find a wheelchair-accessible 5km parkrun near you, or discover more inclusive local events at parkrun.com.au and runningcalendar.com.au

PHOTO

Left and below: Spinal Life members, staff and friends at the 2026 Transurban Bridge to Brisbane.

PHOTO

Left: Spinal Life member Kym Raatz and helpers at Beach Day Out.
Below, from left: Courtney Denovan (Client Service Officer), Kerrin-Lea Smith (Regional Manager – Queensland Central), Donna Wisbey (Spinal Life Personal Support Worker) and Spinal Life member Sonya Galvin with her gorgeous dog, Paddy.

Beach, please!

Spinal Life helped make a splash as Beach Day Out returned to Emu Park.

Sunshine, sea air and plenty of smiles were on the agenda when Beach Day Out returned to Bell Park at Emu Park on the Capricorn Coast, on 18 September.

Now in its 11th year, the annual event brings people with disability, families and carers together for a morning of accessible beach activities, entertainment and community connection – while helping break down some of the barriers that can make a simple trip to the beach anything but simple.

Spinal Life was proud to again be one of the sponsors of the event, with the local team working alongside Move Mobility and the Physiotherapy Department at Central Queensland University to help people get off the sidelines and onto the sand.

Beach wheelchairs, accessible matting and hands-on support helped participants make their way across the beach and into the ocean, while there was plenty happening back on dry land, from stalls and activities to live performances.

"Beach Day Out is always such a fantastic event to be part of," says Kerrin-Lea Smith, Spinal Life Regional Manager – Queensland Central. "It's a truly inclusive event for people of all ages and abilities, and there's something really special about seeing everyone enjoying the sand and the ocean with their family and friends. We're proud to help make that experience more accessible."

For everyone involved, the morning was a chance to catch up with familiar faces, make new connections and, most importantly, enjoy something many people take for granted – a day at the beach. Ⓐ

Spinal Life supports people across the Rockhampton region. To find out more, visit spinal.com.au or call 1300 774 625.

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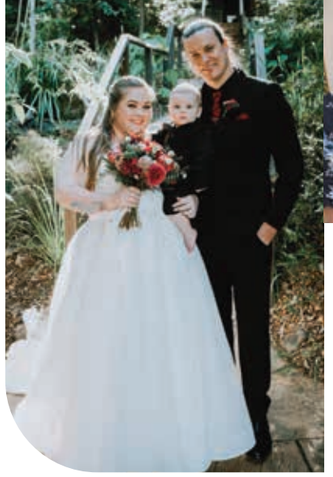
The Bonds of love

From hands-on support to urgent rostering, Chloe Kennington brings first-hand experience to every shift she helps fill.



PHOTO

Left: Chloe with her husband Thomas and their son, Theo, on their wedding day earlier this year. Above: Chloe with mum Hayley and son Theo. "His Grammy was Theo's favourite person in the whole wide world."

Chloe Kennington knows Spinal Life's Personal Support service from both sides. She joined the organisation as a Personal Support Worker (PSW) during the early days of COVID, while studying nursing. Four years of supporting clients in their homes followed, before Chloe moved into the rostering team, initially combining both roles.

Today, as a Shift Fill Officer, she works in an urgent 72-hour capacity, helping cover shifts when a PSW becomes unavailable or a client needs additional support.

"It's a lot of juggling," smiles Chloe, 27, who lives in the Ipswich region with her husband, Thomas, and their 18-month-old son, Theo.

Her years as a PSW give her valuable insight into that juggling act. Chloe understands why a particular worker might suit a client, why some shifts are harder to fill and, importantly, what an unfilled shift can mean for someone relying on support.

That first-hand experience is also what changed the direction of her own career. Chloe had completed half of a nursing degree when she joined Spinal Life, but discovered she loved the relationships created through support work.

"You really get to know people when you're one-on-one in their space," she says. "There are challenges in any job, but I loved that role and I loved my clients."

The past couple of years have brought some major life changes. When Chloe and Thomas began planning a family, she wanted a work-from-home role but was keen to stay with Spinal Life. The move into workforce planning offered both – along with opportunities to keep developing her career.

After welcoming Theo, Chloe returned from maternity leave in May this year. She currently works three days a week, and plans to increase her hours next year.

Chloe and her high-school sweetheart Thomas married in February... just seven days after Chloe lost her beloved mum, Hayley, to bowel cancer.

The two were super close, and even during this extraordinarily difficult time, managed to find comfort in a rather niche hobby they started together: collecting vintage Bonds baby clothes.

"It started when we were looking for a particular print, and just took off from there," she says. "I was going through a rough time with mum, and this became a bit of a hyperfixation – an escape."

According to Chloe, there's a whole crazy Bonds universe out there – literally thousands of parents on Facebook trying to track down sought-after items. Her own collection now fills five or six storage tubs – and she only started collecting in November.

"I thought my son was my hobby for now, but I guess this is too," she laughs. Ⓐ

For more about Spinal Life's Personal Support and Home Care Services, visit spinal.com.au/personalsupport

Mum's message

Chloe's mum Hayley was just 46 when she died from bowel cancer on Valentine's Day this year, after living with the disease for three years.

Hayley was passionate about encouraging people not to dismiss possible symptoms because they think they're too young to be at risk. The message was even included in her eulogy, and Chloe continues her mum's legacy by sharing it whenever she can.

Australians aged 45 to 74 without symptoms are eligible for free bowel cancer screening every two years. If you have possible symptoms, don't wait – talk to your doctor.

Find out more at health.gov.au/nbcsp

Enjoy genuinely accessible holiday and rehabilitation stays in the heart of Cairns.

"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.

The Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre offers modern, fully accessible accommodation designed to make travel easy.

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SCAN TO READ RAYMOND'S REVIEW

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spinalhealthyliving.com.au

Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre

On the radar

News, notes and inclusive wins.

Small change

Finding the right rental property can be difficult for anyone. For people with disability, something as simple as a step at the front door can rule a property out altogether.

Yet relatively simple modifications – such as temporary ramps or grab rails – can make a home safer, more accessible and easier to live in, giving people greater independence and confidence in their own home.

A new campaign is helping renters with disability understand their rights and feel more confident requesting accessibility modifications – while encouraging property owners and managers to understand their benefits and feel more confident saying yes.

***Small Changes, Big Difference* has been developed by Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN) with the Real Estate Institute of Queensland (REIQ), people with lived experience of disability, government and industry representatives.**

The campaign comes as the 2025 *Voices of Queenslanders with Disability* report found one in three people with disability surveyed lived in a home that did not meet their needs. A lack of accessible housing and modifications were among the main challenges reported when trying to find a suitable home, limiting people's choice about where and how they live.

Modifications don't necessarily mean major renovations. Small changes can improve safety and independence, while making properties more accessible to older people, carers and families with young children – and potentially improving their functionality and long-term value for years to come.

The campaign includes practical information for renters about requesting modifications, alongside resources designed to help property owners and real estate professionals better understand accessible housing.

Find out more at: qdn.org.au/home-mods

Street level

In August, eight participants took to the streets of Wynnum while using wheelchairs for the fourth annual Wynnum Wheelchair Challenge, experiencing first-hand some of the accessibility barriers people with limited mobility can encounter every day.

Organised by the Rotary Club of Wynnum and Manly and supported by Spinal Life, the challenge sent participants around the Wynnum CBD to complete everyday tasks, from entering shops to accessing toilets and other services.

Common problems included excessive footpath crossfalls, uneven surfaces, difficult road crossings, inaccessible shop entrances, limited accessible parking and narrow pedestrian spaces. While returning participants noticed improvements in some areas, the event highlighted how small barriers can affect independence and community participation.

Goods purchased during the challenge were donated to St Pete's Pantry for distribution to clients in need.

To find out more, visit: rcwm.org

Win-win

Win cash while helping create more opportunities for Queenslanders with disability to get active. Sporting Wheelies Art Union tickets offer a $20,000 first prize, plus $5,000 VIP bonus draws each month. Ticket sales support Sporting Wheelies' sport and recreation programs, helping people with disability lead active, healthy and connected lives.

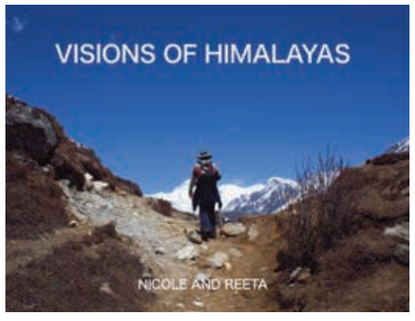
For tickets and more info, visit: sportingwheelies.org.au/lottery

Still here

October is Polio Awareness Month – and Australia's polio survivors want people to know they're still here. Many people who contracted polio decades ago now live with its late effects or Post-Polio Syndrome, making access to knowledgeable health care and support important. The Gold Coast Post-Polio Network, a Spinal Life peer support group, will mark the month with a special gathering on 12 October.

Find out more: polioaustralia.org.au

Peak perspective



A journey through the Himalayas has become a photographic book – and an opportunity to give back. *Visions of Himalayas: Nepal* documents Nepal's Khumbu region through the eyes of Nepalese nature enthusiast Reeta and Nicole, a photographer with vision impairment and one of Sporting Wheelies' Game Changers; who shares her lived experience in disability awareness presentations to Queensland school students. The 140-page book captures the region's landscapes and wildlife. A donation from every copy sold until November will support Nepal. Ⓐ

More at: booktopia.com.au – search ISBN 9781764827607

The quiet ACHIEVER

After more than three decades fighting for accessibility and inclusion, John Mayo is calling time on an extraordinary career with Spinal Life.

When John Mayo joined Spinal Life – then the Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association of Queensland – in 1994, he could hardly have asked for a more memorable first assignment.

The Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre was under construction at the time. It had a grand entrance featuring 27 steps – but no lift. Anyone unable to climb them would have to enter elsewhere, "round the back".

After 18 months of unsuccessful lobbying, the issue headed to court. Days before the hearing, John gathered members outside the site as Channel 9 captured concrete being poured into the steps.

Spinal Life's then vice-president, the late Bill Garsden, looked directly into the camera and uttered four devastating words: "This is architectural apartheid."

The words made headlines. The discrimination case that followed became a landmark victory – and those 27 steps would no longer be the only way in. A lift was installed alongside them.

For John, it was quite an introduction to a career in advocacy.

Over the next 32 years, he would become a formidable voice for accessibility and inclusion, working with members, governments, businesses and disability organisations to help bring about change.

John's background wasn't in law or disability services, but marketing and communications, including senior roles with *The Age* and *The Courier-Mail*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he quickly discovered the power of a compelling story.

"I've always believed in trying to be very reasonable," he says. "Stay calm, smile a lot, and talk about the facts – talk about the impacts for the person."

That approach has taken John into close to 100 discrimination conciliation proceedings supporting members. His work was recognised with a United Nations International Year of the Built Environment Award for accessibility, following nominations by two Queensland Government departments. Characteristically, he regards it as a tribute to the many members he supported in challenging discrimination and non-compliance through legal channels.

Transport, in particular, has transformed during his career. John has contributed to projects involving buses, ferries and rail, including the refurbishment of Queensland's New Generation Rollingstock trains and accessibility planning for Cross River Rail and 65 'inclusive design' new trains to run from the Gold Coast to Brisbane to Sunshine Coast return.

Housing has proved a much tougher battle, but John has spent decades campaigning for accessibility standards in new homes and welcomed Queensland's introduction of mandatory standards in 2023.

Now officially retired, he can look back with pride on a career that has helped make Queensland more accessible – although he's not disappearing just yet.

John will continue working with Spinal Life on a major bus accessibility project he has championed for the past decade – and one we'll be telling you more about in a future issue.

For now, though, we simply say thank you, John, for 32 extraordinary years. Ⓐ

PHOTO

Above: John Mayo discusses accessibility in front of a replica of one of Queensland's 65 new passenger trains, set to roll out from 2027. Right: John with Spinal Life CEO Mark Townend (left) and transport engineer Amin Noroozi (right).

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