

# A Home of My Own

Cameron Skinner and Deb Rouget

*Cameron Skinner lives in Warragul, Victoria. He is a receptionist for the Jeremiah Business Group, lives in his own home and believes in the importance of giving back to community through volunteering and sharing his story at workshops and conferences. He is also an avid Collingwood Football Club supporter.*

*Deb Rouget has been involved in the lives of people with a disability and families for nearly 30 years. She has been the Chief Executive Officer of Belonging Matters since its inception in 2003. Belonging Matters is an education, capacity building and advisory service in Melbourne focused on assisting individuals with disabilities and their families to imagine and pursue lifestyles that are authentically enriched with community and belonging.*

## Deb Rouget

When I first met Cameron in 2003, he was not in a great place. He was very lonely and isolated and had very few roles. However, Cameron's vision for his life was quite clear and quite typical. He wanted to move out of home and get a job! However, because of his mental health needs, intellectual disability and Cerebral Palsy, the system had a very narrow view of his possible life path. It was restricted to day programs and potentially group home living. The future seemed bleak but with a belief in Cameron's potential and a vision for a typical and inclusive life, we began to craft a very different version of the future!

## Cameron Skinner

Prior to 2004, I was living in Neerim South with my parents. I was isolated and lonely spending most days by myself. Mum and Dad built a small unit on their farm where I lived. I got sick and moved back into the house

with Mum and Dad. After a while my health improved a bit and Mum and Dad asked me if I would like to move out of home. We had a meeting with Deb Rouget from Belonging Matters. I told Deb about what I wanted to do. I really wanted a job and to move to Warragul because there was nothing to do in Neerim South. I also spoke about the things I liked to do.

We did some planning and applied to get funding. I didn't think I would get the funding but I did. This was great! We then looked for a house in Warragul and looked for a housemate. When I first moved into my own place it was a bit weird as I had never really been away from Mum and Dad before. It took me a while to settle in but I got used to it. I love living in Warragul because everything is close. I can walk to shops, cafes and the movies.

Since moving out of home I have rented three different houses. I had to move as the landlord needed or sold the house. One year after I moved into my first home, Denise my support worker helped me to get a part time job as a receptionist. Work has been great. I get paid and I have grown as a human being. I get on well with my workmates and have made lots of friends at work. My boss Gerrard is great. I have met some of his friends and went away to watch the cricket with them.

I have had a few housemates over the years. Caroline moved out and Brian and Lincoln both got married. I still see them and we spend time visiting each other or catching up down the street. It was important to me that I got on well with my housemates. They needed to be smart, have a good sense of humour and like spending time together. Often, we would kick the footy, go

to the movies or share a meal. If I felt down I could talk to them. I didn't want to live with someone who was demanding or pushy. My housemates helped me learn things. For example, cooking, doing the chores and making my bed. They got free rent and we split the bills down the middle. My last housemate didn't work out so well. At the moment, I'm living by myself!

My neighbours have been important. Sometimes I have helped with the street working bee. I don't really like gardening but it's good to help out trimming other people's hedges. Fay and Ron say I'm the best neighbour they have ever had! Sally and Pete were also my neighbours. They have moved but I still see them down the street. They reckon I'm a legend!

Having my own place is great because I can do what I want. I have come a long way and it has given me independence. I have learnt how to run my house, pay the bills and look after myself. I love it. I'm so happy and content with my life. I wouldn't want to change a thing. I've got the best life!

## Deb Rouget

Home is not merely a roof over one's head. It often our sanctuary and its very personal and private. Yet, often people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are predominantly marginalised and socially excluded and do not experience the same rights and opportunities as other citizens.<sup>1</sup>

The report Shut Out, 2009 states that 'Once shut in, many people with disabilities now find themselves shut out. People with disabilities may be present in our community, but too few are part of it. Many live desperate and lonely lives of exclusion and isolation.'<sup>2</sup> Although large institutions have

largely closed, the current group home models offered to people with intellectual disabilities still congregate and separate people from their communities. Such models offer little choice to people as to where or with whom they would like to live with, are characterised by paid staff, established routines and ownership resides with government or non-government organisations with no guarantee of continuity.<sup>3,4</sup>

To explore the learnings from Cameron's story I have used the themes and attributes of the Individualised Support Living Framework.<sup>5</sup> This framework was a three-stage research project aimed at examining the 'characteristics and outcomes achieved when adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities were provided with necessary support to enable them to live in their own homes'.

### Leadership

The initial impetus for Cameron to move into his own home came in 2001 when his mum, Maggie was invited to a presentation hosted by the Department of Health and Human Services in Gippsland, Victoria. Dr Michael Kendrick, a parent and myself spoke about personalised supports, self and family directed supports and social inclusion.

'This is a day I will never forget because it resulted in the most significant change in my thinking, which was to result in a huge transformation in Cameron's life. They told us stories about people with disability getting a more meaningful life and following typical pathways. We learned about young people getting jobs that they liked and enjoyed doing. Planning to move into their own homes and follow their interests...

On that day I learned that it was possible, to turn your dreams into reality. With planning and vision Cameron could have a good life. This was the beginning of a very exciting, and at times stressful period for my family... Shortly after this meeting I invited Deb Rouget



Artwork by Coralie Hinkley, Mission Australia's Artwork Program

to come and talk to us as a family. We sat around our kitchen table and shared what we thought were the possibilities for Cam. I was thinking an option would be to share a house with another person with a disability. Deb helped us identify some of the pitfalls that this type of arrangement could have on Cameron, looking at the pros and cons. We then explored options that Deb suggested that could be possible for Cam and she started helping us to think beyond what our previous blinkered vision of his future.<sup>6</sup>

By being exposed to other innovative options, leadership examples and having access to capacity enhancing support, Cameron and his family were given permission to dream and create something that was uniquely Cameron and typical of what most home leavers experience. In 2014, we established a clear vision which has anchored Cameron's life in his own home and community.

The significance of clear vision, sharing examples and leadership should not be underestimated. It is the spark and the glue that can make things happen and avoid a life of homelessness and dependence on traditional models. 'Prior to this time, we had wrongly pigeonholed

Cam into something that he did not want to be — a dependent person, a client, a service user, an unemployed person. Now he is an employee, a housemate, a tenant, taxpayer, consumer, friend, colleague and much, much more.'<sup>7</sup> Cameron, Maggie and Greg now provide leadership to others through sharing their story.

### My Home

Cameron's home is in a typical neighbourhood and typical street. If you were to ask neighbours 'who lives over the road' they would say 'That's Cameron's house!' Cameron's home reflects his personality — Collingwood picture adorn the walls, there's a big screen TV for Foxtel and up until recently a home for his much beloved dog Monte. The rituals and routines are uniquely Cameron's. Like all young people when first

moving out of the family home he had to learn skills and set up his own routines. Living with a housemate made this possible. Interestingly, although Cameron had support from a housemate, there wasn't a 'staff' room, rosters on the wall, sprinkler systems, shift change overs, a white bus in the drive way etc. His home is not a workplace or owned by a service — the lease is in Cameron's name. Thus, he has secure tenure even when housemates leave.

### One Person at a Time

Cameron's home has been developed around his aspirations and needs. He wanted to live in his own home and move closer to employment opportunities. As with many parent's, originally Maggie and Greg thought Cameron should live with another person with a disability. During discussion, they identified the difficulties and compromises that might have been necessary if Cameron was to live a another person with a disability. As Greg suggested in the video Home and Belonging '...the main reason why we wanted Cameron to have a housemate who did not have a disability was the fact that it would be who would be supporting who... We wanted it to be Cameron's house, and for him to be able to learn from a housemate....'<sup>8</sup>

## Planning Focuses on the Person

Focusing planning on Cameron as an individual, not as a person with a disability was central to the process. The planning and strategy were prioritised into five key areas: Cam would live in his own home close to work; have a housemate for support; employ a support worker who could assist him to find paid employment; initiate a Circle of Support and develop social opportunities in his local community.<sup>9</sup> 'We worked through the priorities and...Cameron moved into his own place in June 2004'.<sup>10</sup>

## Control

Cameron and the people closest to him have control over his life, rather than an agency or service. Although Cameron needs some support and guidance, he determines where he lives, who he lives with, the decor, his routines, what he does in his spare time and all other aspects of daily living. He also chooses and directs his own support workers. This was possible by choosing to self-direct Cameron's funding package. 'As parents, this process felt that we were taking charge with Cameron and that it was his dreams and hopes that were the driving force. We all felt empowered, particularly Cameron'.<sup>11</sup>

## Support

An important part of Cameron's life, like all people, is to have support. A lot of Cameron's supports these days are naturally occurring as a result of increasing his roles in the community, for example, neighbour, employee, friend and community member. Cameron's housemates receive free rent in lieu of support. His housemates have assisted Cameron to learn all the aspects of living in his own home. This enabled a much more natural and equal relationship, rather than having high degrees of paid support.

Through Cameron's Individualised Support Package (ISP) and a self-directed funding arrangement, support workers have been recruited for specific roles over the years. Denise, for example was specifically recruited to assist Cameron to find paid employment. Given Cameron loves people, she was able to secure a job as a receptionist at a local business. Her

role was then to focus on building Cameron's skills in the role in a very personalised manner. Overtime this was replaced with naturally occurring supports in the workplace.

At the moment Cameron is not living with a housemate however, they have been a vital and crucial component of Cameron learning to manage his own home. He also receives a few hours support each week from Steve, his support worker who teaches him new recipes and helps with cleaning. Cameron also employs a gardener to do the lawns and garden. Through a self-directed funding arrangement, Cameron together with his family are able to choose and direct support workers. This has also been crucial as it has enabled the right match in support worker in regard to task and for his personality.

## Thriving

Cameron has thrived over the years because he has a typical and inclusive living arrangement that has been specifically designed and tailored to his needs. As he states above 'I'm so happy, I'm so content with my own life — I wouldn't change a thing'. This is a long way from the isolated and lonely person I met in 2003. Cameron now has many valued roles in the community. He is a tenant, neighbour, employee, volunteer, friend, housemate, sports fan and customer. He is also a well-known and respected community identity. Through these roles Cameron has had many opportunities for growth and development such as learning the roles and responsibilities of living in your own home, solving problems, getting to know new people, volunteering at the local market, being a good neighbour and friend. His role as a receptionist has taught him many nuanced skills such as doing the banking, greeting business people, administration duties, answering phones, time management, data entry and going to the post office.

## Social Inclusion

Moving from his parent's small farm to Warragul has made a huge difference to Cameron's community inclusion and contribution. He has strong relationships with his work mates and has been away to watch the cricket interstate with his boss! His neighbours, Fay and Ron say he's the best neighbour they have

ever had! Cameron has volunteered at the farmer's market and at neighbourhood working bees. He can walk to the shops and knows everyone in town! As seen in the video *The Receptionist*<sup>12</sup> he will be walking down the street and someone will greet him with a handshake or smile and call him a legend! His previous housemates have a lasting bond with Cameron. They visit each other and Cameron enjoys spending time with Brian's children. Although Lincoln has moved to Melbourne, he catches up with Cameron when he's in town!

## Summary

Cameron's story has many lessons about assisting people to develop a much deeper sense of home rather than having merely a roof over one's head or being 'accommodated'. Home was developed intentionally with Cameron as a unique individual — not only in regard to his 'home life' but in relation to his support, connection to community, economic contribution and life purpose. If all of these aspects had not been adequately developed, Cameron could have been at risk of continued isolation, dependence, poverty and loneliness within his own home!

## Endnotes

1. World Health Organization 2011, *World Report on Disability*. In Cocks E, Thoresen S H, O'Brien P and McVilly K 2017, *Individualised Supported Living (ISL) for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, Curtin University, Perth.
2. National People with Disabilities and Carers Council 2009, *Shut Out Report: The Experience of People with a Disability and their Families in Australia*, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra, p. 1.
3. Cocks E, Thoresen S H, O'Brien P and McVilly K 2017, *Individualised Supported Living (ISL) for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, Curtin University, Perth.
4. National People with Disabilities and Carers Council 2009, op cit.
5. Cocks E, Thoresen S H, O'Brien P and McVilly K 2017, op cit, p. 5.
6. Skinner M 2010, Thinking About More than Accommodation, *Belonging Matters*, Issue 3, pp. 10-11, Melbourne.
7. Ibid.
8. Skinner C 2015, *Home and Belonging*. Retrieved from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=8&v=h9N\\_3x6YMeC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=8&v=h9N_3x6YMeC)
9. Skinner M 2010, op cit.
10. Ibid, p. 11.
11. Ibid p. 10.
12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vR8wJQfSGxU>