

# Cameron's story

by Maggie Skinner

This is the story of my son, Cameron's journey to a happy, independent and meaningful life. Prior to June 2004 Cam was a 26-year-old man spending the majority of his time in his bedroom listening to music. Since finishing high school at the local secondary college, end of 1995, he had not been able to obtain regular meaningful work. And by the time he was 23 or 24 he had lost his enthusiasm and was becoming reclusive. His dad, Greg, and I were very concerned about his mental and physical health, trying to think of ways to help him out of this situation. We tried many options, some of these were:

- *Building him a one bedroom unit on our property.*  
This was a disaster, we thought it was the solution to our concerns, but only reinforced Cam's isolation and empty lifestyle. What the unit provided was a larger space for him to do nothing. Not what he wanted and offered no significant change to his lifestyle.
- *Getting him a dog for company and to improve his fitness.*  
Very successful.
- *Encouraged him to attend local Adult Training Support Service.*  
Mind-numbingly boring and dull.
- *Continued to encourage him to attend a more socially orientated day service.*  
Not much better. He enjoyed the people but not the activities.
- *Helping him set up his own business.*  
This was cutting and bagging kindling in our shed which he found lonely and isolating.

In 2001 I was fortunate to be invited by a manager at the Department of Human Services (DHS), Traralgon office to hear some speakers. The manager assured me that I would find it interesting and relevant to our family situation. So I went along not knowing anything about the speakers.

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.

The speakers were: Deb Rouget - Facilitator PLA,

Michael Kendrick and a parent. 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. This was the first time I heard of Personalised Lifestyle Assistance, PLA.

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 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 could be possible for Cam and she started helping us to think beyond what our previous blinkered vision of his future was.

Cameron told us very clearly what he wanted, which was a job, and to live in his own place with a friend. PLA helped us with creating and developing Cam's vision.

We discussed and received assistance with compiling a submission to DHS. We bounced ideas around about housemates, support workers, employment, circles of support, and the transition from the family home to his own place. There was a lot to think of and it was invaluable knowing that PLA was just a phone call away if, and when we needed it.

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.

Shortly after lodging a funding submission to DHS we were advised that it had been successful which meant that we actually had to go through with all this independence stuff. Scary. However, we knew that this was the right thing for Cameron and continued with nervous enthusiasm.



Our strategy was prioritised to the following areas:

1. *Accommodation*

The reasoning behind this was to increase employment opportunities. We live in a small rural town with very few job options. Relocating to a regional town 20 minutes from home would allow greater prospects of finding work.

2. *Housemate*

3. *Employ someone that Cam knows to assist him look for work.*

After leaving school we tried other job search options and found them unsatisfactory. We believed that this way we were more in control.

4. *Set up circle of support.*

5. *Develop social opportunities for Cam.*

We worked through the priorities and the results are:

Cameron moved into his own place in June 2004.

In 6 years he has shared his home with 4 housemates. Each and every one of them has enriched his life. They have shared with him from as little as 4 months to 3 years. His fourth housemate, Lincoln, moved in 4 weeks ago. The housemates do not have a disability. They help him with the little things that he has trouble with and for this assistance their share of the rent is paid for by his funding.

In October 2004 a job was secured for him as receptionist at the Jerimiah Business Centre in Warragul. Cam works part time, four days a week and now has a permanent position with the company. He loves his job.

Cam has made lots of new friends since moving into his home. He knows his neighbours, and has met lots of people through work

Eight months after Cameron moved into his own home and a circle of support was operating successfully around him Greg and I began the journey of a lifetime. We spent 12 months travelling the western half of this country. When we first discussed travel some time ago, I believed that Cam would have to come with us. And I knew that he would not enjoy this type of travel. Not for a minute did I think that we would be in a position to travel for an extended period with Cam living in his own home and loving it.

Well we did, and we loved it and Cameron tells us that it was the best thing for him.

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.

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