

Accommodation ~ it's more than a matter of housing

by Jo Walters

Living Distinctive Lives (LDL) is a small family governed group with a focus on supporting each person with a disability to move into and to live in their own home. However, the members of LDL believe that a house alone does not equal a good life, so rather than looking at accommodation in isolation a whole of life approach is taken and each individual is supported to connect to and entwine with the fabric and life of the community that they are a part of.

Jo Walters is the coordinator of Living Distinctive Lives. She has worked with this group for the last 2 years as they support their sons and daughters to live in their own homes and to develop meaningful lives in the community. A member of the PLA committee Jo is also currently studying a Masters in Transformative and Integrative Studies at Oases Graduate School. Through her study she is exploring community as a dynamic living organism which, in order to be sustainable and healthy, requires each and every individual to express their intrinsic Self and fulfil a vital role. In this way she is looking at how best to work with individuals with a disability, their families and the wider community to support this process.

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The desire for home is a desire for comfort, safety, security and self. Home beyond all other places is where we can really express who we are, a place where we belong, as this quote states, “A house is made of walls and beams; a home is built with love and dreams” (Author unknown). This is why on the topic of accommodation options for people with a disability it is important not to start with the question of a house, but with the question of a life. This is why in my role as Coordinator with Living Distinctive Lives I find myself focusing not on housing alone, but working with families on the creation of a vision, a dream of what sort of life it is that their son or daughter wants.

This is done by supporting each individual and their family to develop a positive vision for the future; they are supported to think about what it is that they want, the type of home, who they would like to live with, social connections and work roles, and then what supports they will need to achieve these goals. It is then a process of co-creation, and planning. Each individual is also supported to identify those who are around them who support their vision; this can mean building upon existing relationships, and developing new ones. These allies may be in the form of family, friends, neighbours, support workers, housemates, and disability support services that are willing to help hold the vision for a good life, lived in the community.

As well as the development of a vision, the families in LDL are also committed to the following principles. These principles form a foundation for planning and action and act as a reference point as people move towards their vision of a good life.

- A circle of supportive people is essential to the well-being of individuals in the community.
- All individuals have the right to a meaningful life in the community.
- All individuals have the right to decide where they want to live, who they want to live with, and how they want to live.
- Home is about being connected to community and having valuable roles and relationships.
- Life planning should be creative and driven by the individual and those closest to them.
- The needs and preferences of individuals change over time and they should be supported through these changes to ensure a satisfying life.

In my role I have come to believe that the following points are of great importance in achieving positive outcomes, and a good life for individuals in their own home in the community.

- A plan should be a living story of somebody's life, and the life that they wish to have. It should include all aspects of the person, from personal care needs, and health concerns through to goals

around personal relationships, spiritual needs and safeguards for the future.

- The planning and actioning should be driven by the individual and/or their family and those closest to them.
- It is important for each individual and their family to have all the information and knowledge that is important to them. This includes information on funding dollars, funding applications, and to know the true cost of the supports that they have in place.
- Individuals and families should use this information to decide where their funding is held and what it is used for.
- Individuals and families should be supported to decide who works with them and direct the workers themselves.
- For many individuals and their families this is a process of regaining the authority to make some of the most important decisions in their lives, such as where they live, who they live with and who will support them.
- The role of informal supports cannot be understated; these allies can help through the planning process, through providing social supports and by reinforcing the goals and vision that has been developed.
- A home of one's own is not about independence but of meeting each individual's needs with a range of supports and striving to achieve the vision that they have for their future.
- Any person, regardless of their disability is able to be supported to live in their own place, and with individualised support they will be much more likely to have their own unique needs met.

In 2009 LDL also established the Community Inclusion Initiative; this was made possible by a grant from the Scanlon Foundation, and means that LDL also has the resources of a Community Inclusion Facilitator. This project is focused on building inclusion and social cohesion, by connecting individuals with their communities and increasing the communities' ability and interest supporting the inclusion of people with a disability. This is done one person at a time, building on each relationship to establish strong and meaningful community connections. Another key aspect of LDL is in supporting families to build their capacity, to take on leadership roles in the community, and to share their stories with others.

The individuals and families in LDL are on a journey, and whilst the goal is for a home of one's

own, along the way members are also looking for and finding

- ways of meeting each individual's unique needs
- of achieving inclusion
- of pulling back from a reliance on services
- and are stepping out of the role of client and into the role of community member

Living Distinctive Lives is not a service, it is if anything a mechanism for individualised vision building, planning and support. LDL does not have clients, it has group members, individuals with a disability and their families, it also includes the support workers, the circle members and other allies, and is interested in looking at how to further involve and connect these people to the group. LDL doesn't do things for people; rather it gives people the support and structure to make significant improvements' in the lives of their family members, as a group LDL helps to inspire and to facilitate change.

Colleen's story

At the end of 2009 Colleen moved into a two bedroom unit in Ashburton. She lives there with her housemate Wen and her dog Danya.

During the day Colleen volunteers at a children's music group, she attends swimming lessons and water aerobics and is part of a local drama group. Colleen has also started working at Coles part-time.

Colleen's life wasn't always this ordinary. Ten years ago Colleen had a stroke, from which it was thought she would never recover. Colleen continues to live with the effects of the stroke; she has an Acquired Brain Injury, which impacts on her in a number of ways but with much planning and a range of innovative supports Colleen has been able to realise her dream of having a home of her own.

After an extensive period of rehabilitation Colleen moved into supported accommodation. However she wasn't happy in the group home so moved in with her parents. To help her maintain her independence as much as possible her brother built her a flat out the back of her parents' house. However she was in effect still living with her parents and they were still providing the majority of support.

The family recognised the need for change and so started to look for ways for Colleen to have her own life, but with the supports that she needs. In 2008 the family met Deb Rouget of PLA and over a period of months started to plan for the kind of life that would

met Colleen's needs, and fulfil her goal of moving out of home. Through attendance at conferences and workshops put on by PLA they got to listen to other people's stories and became inspired to find a way for Colleen to achieve her goals.

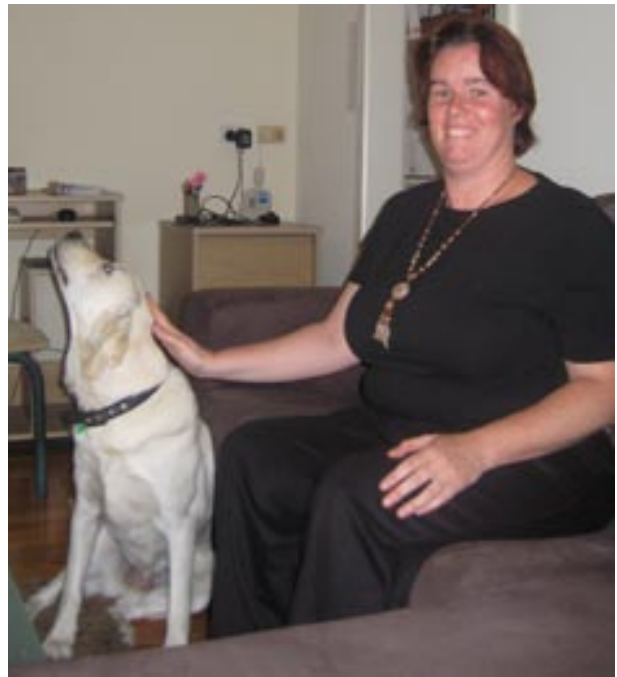
Deb introduced Colleen and her family to Living Distinctive Lives, a small family Governed group, who with the support of a Coordinator, and community inclusion facilitator, plan, and create ways for individuals with a disability to live an ordinary life in the community, a life outside of the disability service setting.

Part of this process involved establishing a Circle of Support around Colleen; Colleen and her parents also decided to have the funding Colleen receives from DHS hosted by a service. This arrangement gives the family the autonomy to select, supervise and direct the support workers in Colleen's life.

To support Colleen in her own home her family looked for a Housemate, who would get along well with Colleen and also be able to provide some support. Arranged through Wesley Homeshare Colleen's housemate Wen helps her out by preparing some meals and assisting with other tasks. In return for this Wen receives her accommodation rent free.

Today Colleen has the responsibilities and the choices that for most of us take for granted, this has only been possible because her family wanted to find way for Colleen to live her life her way.

The story shared here is a part of the journey that Colleen and her family are on, the starting point was recognising that life could be better, then Colleen was supported with her family to voice what it was she wanted, to develop her vision of a future, and to think about what arrangement would meet her needs, increase her independence, and allow her and her family to retain authority and choice. This paved the way for planning and the steps that have been taken so far. But Colleen's journey continues, new ideas are born, needs change, interests vary, support workers move on and more need to be found, all of this is a continual process of change, of listening, of looking, of always keeping your eye on the vision, and slowly and steadily moving towards it. Colleen's story is unique, it is hers, and hers alone, it is also however an example of how LDL works. It demonstrates that by coming together around core values, by sharing strong principles, and holding onto hope for the future, each person with a disability can be supported to move into and to live in their own home.



Colleen with Danya