

HOUSEMATES, A MORE TYPICAL WAY OF LIVING

by Maggie Skinner

Maggie Skinner is a parent and passionate advocate for individualised Supported Living arrangements. Maggie and her family decided that the disability service accommodation models available were incompatible with their philosophy and belief in what a good life required. Maggie's son Cameron, who has dual disability, has lived in his own home with a variety of supports for 11 years. He is a valued neighbour and has been employed as a receptionist at a local business for 10 years!



As parents, we had not thought much about where Cameron would live when it was time for him to move out of home, because it had always seemed so far into the future. However, the time arrived well before we were ready and we had some serious thinking to do. When Cameron was 20 years of age, we realised he was not happy: he had been caught up in day programs and wanted regular employment, and to move out of home like his brother and sister. My husband Greg and I also had a vision for our own lives – we longed to travel as grey nomads all over Australia and spend time together after raising our family! – and we

Cameron to get a permanent job and live in his own home as part of a supportive, caring neighbourhood. Rather than focus on “special” places offered by the system, we had to reorientate our thinking towards imagining how to arrange personalised support to assist Cameron to live a meaningful life, full of “typical” opportunities in his community. I attended a number of educational events organised by Belonging Matters and then met with facilitator Deb Rouget. Deb came to our home and asked Cameron what he wanted to do with his life. We found that he wanted a job in Warragul and to live in his own place with a friend.

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Once we had this information, we thrashed out how we could achieve Cameron's vision.

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caravans!

Our vision for Cameron was not dissimilar to the vision we held for his siblings: to work, to live in his own place, perhaps share with friends, get to know his neighbours and develop a range of friendships and lasting relationships. We found the segregated models available within the disability system did not fit with our expectations of a good life for our son, who happens to have a dual disability. We had to explore how to assist



home, but he did not need a “carer”. He also spoke about companionship. We learnt that one option was for Cameron to live in his own home with a housemate to assist where necessary and provide companionship. It seemed so typical, really – after all, it's what our other children had done!

do we find a good person, how do we find a compatible person, how do we find a person that will assist rather than do everything for Cameron, and many, many more. There is a lot of information on the internet about home-sharing arrangements, and at first we felt

However, with Cameron, we needed

be more intentional about the support required to live in his own home.

Throughout Cameron's life, we had fostered community involvement in non-segregated environments (eg. mainstream school), so we did not want his home to become a “service” environment or “workplace” for staff.

Recruiting can be done in many ways. Our first option is ‘word of mouth’! As Cameron has become increasingly involved in the

In addition, we did not seek a housemate with a disability. We felt that a person with a disability may not be in a position to provide the support and guidance Cameron needed, as they might also have considerable needs. We wanted someone who could teach, mentor and guide Cameron in cooking and domestic tasks, and possibly become a friend, share companionship and occasional recreational activities. In return for this assistance, we decided that the housemate would receive free rent.



community, we have gotten to know some applicants and/or their families, and thus

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The idea of Cameron living with a housemate gave us the confidence to believe that he could live away from home. It would provide the security of another person in the house and decrease his vulnerability, which was one of our major concerns. The task of finding a good housemate was daunting at first. Questions arose, such as how

have an inkling of their suitability. Gumtree is another method that has been successful for families, or advertising in local newspapers or at TAFE's, universities and student notice boards.

We designed an interview process around Cameron and asked for referees. Some people or families may feel a first aid certificate is

reasonable about expectations. During the first meeting, we would explain what was expected by clarifying both Cameron's and the housemate's roles

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and responsibilities. We also found it very useful to

discuss how space important if medical assistance is required, or a police check, or anything else they believe is important. However, it is important to remember that you're not engaging a "carer", but a housemate who can provide some assistance.

was used in the house, and what private space Cameron or the housemate needed. We all need our own space at times!

We found that several meetings were usually required to get to know the potential housemate and for them to get to know Cameron. The success of the relationship relies

As mentioned before, successful relationships are based on open and honest communication, and sharing a house is no different. We have found that regular visits and observing the interactions between Cameron and his housemate/s are important, as we can pick up on potential issues and deal with them

before they became problematic. It is to be expected that housemates' lives change

and that they will want to move onto the next stage of their lives. If you approach the house-sharing method believing that housemates should stay for lengthy periods, you may be disappointed. At the beginning of conversations with a new housemate, we request a twelve-month commitment. Cameron's longest housemate lived with him for three years. Cameron has had two housemates that were single when they moved in, met the women of their dreams, got married

and, of course, moved out! One housemate now has three children, and Cameron still keeps in touch and visits them regularly. Almost all of Cameron's housemates

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Email: wombot@desi.net.au

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Belonging Matters
3/178 Boronia Road, Boronia, Vic 3155, Australia
Ph: (03) 9739 8333

