

Stacey's Story

Stacey told her story in an interview which was recorded. This is the transcript.

A Diving Accident

I'm 33 and live with Quadriplegia. I broke my neck diving into a shallow pool 21 years ago. I have some impaired function in my arms and hands, and I use a manual wheelchair - I can get around on flat ground but as soon as there's any incline I have difficulties. On one hand I can't use anything other than the thumb and a little bit of one of my fingers. But on the other hand I can wiggle all my fingers, although they are impaired. I can't straighten both my arms because it was an incomplete injury. I am very lucky that I can move my trunk and back, and I can feel everything.

I live with my husband in Nairne in the Adelaide Hills. We got married three months ago and share custody of my husband's nine year old son; disability and all the other stuff is nothing compared to the challenge of being a step-mum.

The Celebration

I held a charity fundraiser to celebrate the 21st anniversary of my injury and disability. I had to have the celebration because the accident changed my life and these days I would definitely say it changed my life for the better - I don't take things for granted; I've had the most amazing opportunities and done things I would never have done otherwise. I definitely look for the positives in life. I think everything happens for a reason and to me it is more useful to have a positive focus than to dwell on what might, or could, have been.

A Life Just like Everybody Else

At high school I was the only student with a disability. Rather than stand out, I was just one of the crowd. I was unhappy and depressed during highschool. Thankfully by the end of high school I had got all that stuff out of my system and was in a better head-space.

I battled with all the school leavers to find work and was lucky enough to get my first job in open employment within six months of leaving school as a receptionist all-rounder at an engineering company. It was a big thing for me to go, "Wow, I'm part of the real world!" They were looking for someone with a disability for the job.

With a new job, making friends and getting on with life I realised I had a life just like everybody else. Okay, I had a carer come in every morning to help me have a shower and things like that, but I did pretty much what other kids were doing.

I got my license and a car. At that time I wasn't relating to any disability groups or any people living with a disability. It was like I was in denial about being a person with a disability.

I chopped and changed jobs a few times because I got bored really easily. As soon as there was no challenge I began looking for something else. But I ended up back where I started working. I got a phone call from where I previously worked who said "We hear you might be available. We've got this new job that we've created, and think you'd be perfect for it. You know the place inside out, and you know the people. Are you interested?" And so I said, "Oh, yeah, okay."

And so I went back. I ended up in a specially built accessible portable site office in the middle of a workshop. I was the only woman in a workshop with about 80 men, and that's where I met my husband; he was my boss. So, I believe I was meant to go back there.

Working for Myself

It has only been three or four weeks since I left my job and started working for myself as a consultant doing speaking and training. It is very exciting and a little scary because I know it's up to me now. It's quite liberating being in control of my destiny rather than just turning up every day to work towards somebody else's agenda.

I choose to describe what I do as inspirational speaking, rather than motivational speaking because I really want to challenge and change people's thinking. It's a matter of getting people to think deeply about what inspires them, while at the same time seeking inspiration.

I think motivation without inspiration isn't very helpful. Regardless of what any of us do, we really have to connect with what inspires us, and I think that if you don't have things that inspire you, then you don't have drive to do anything differently, or take-on new challenges.

My Attitude to Support Workers

I get very little personal care support. I have someone come in for two hours every second day to help with personal care, and someone else once a fortnight for two hours to do some cleaning. It was a real battle to get that and I had to reduce my personal care hours in order to get it.

I'm pretty independent and I do a lot for myself. You get to a point where you can communicate your needs really well. I think the big thing is to do it in a way that doesn't involve ordering anybody around. I'm really big on making sure I have a respectful relationship with my support workers. I also appreciate everything they do (even though I know they are paid). I make sure I let them know I appreciate everything they are doing.

Volunteering for a Political Party

I use to be involved with the Young Liberals in New South Wales. There was a federal election coming up at the time, and I had the opportunity to work full-time on the campaign as a campaign office and logistics coordinator on a volunteer basis. I learnt a lot and it was a massive experience for someone so young.

Inspirational Speaking

Sometimes I look back and go “How the hell did I get to do inspirational speaking?” It’s not something I ever wanted to do. Last year I was doing a lot of personal development; and I realised that for me to get to another level, I really needed to work on my own mindset and myself, and I think it’s a real struggle to do that. I had lots of technical knowledge and a creative approach to business but I wasn’t getting any results because I didn’t have my headspace right.

I attended an event where the host asked “Does anyone think they could be a speaker, or have they got a book in them?” I looked at him, and I thought, “I think I’m interested!” So I signed up to do a workshop in Sydney about speaking, publishing, publicity and training. When I got to the workshop I was determined I wasn’t going to speak about myself because I didn’t think I had anything of interest or value to offer. I felt nothing I do is that interesting or inspiring - I’m just getting on with life.

I was at the workshop when the host explained speaking has nothing to do with you; it’s got everything to do with your audience and what someone can learn. We started to share our stories but I was very guarded. The host said to me, “You’ve got such an opportunity to be able to help a lot of people, and if you don’t share that, it will just be selfish.”

We had a speaking competition - it was the first time I spoke publicly about my personal life and experience in front of 80 people, including some of the world’s best speakers. I remember thinking “Hey, there might be something in this.” People were coming up to me over the next two days saying how listening to me really helped them. It’s now almost 12 months since baring my soul on stage and it’s just grown from there.

Volunteering in the Solomon Islands - A Life Changing Experience

My specialist recommended I attend a spinal injuries conference in Adelaide. While I was there I visited an exhibit by Motivation Australia – a not for profit organisation aimed at assisting people in the Asia Pacific region. I started asking them questions about wheelchairs for people in developing countries, and through this conversation was offered an opportunity to go to the Solomon Islands as a volunteer trainer to help run a camp for wheelchair users. I’d never ever been out of Australia. They said to me “Have you been overseas? Would you like to go to the Solomon Islands?” I made a split second decision and said “Yes, I’d like to go.”

It was a life changing experience. It probably brought me to the point I'm at now, working as an inspirational speaker. It helped me see my own life experiences as a wheelchair user with a spinal injury, and as a woman, could be of value to other people.

We made an unbelievable impact in a short period of time. Just being there and spending two weeks together, seeing some of the issues they face living with no support, the access is awful, 75% of people in developing countries die within two years of getting a spinal cord injury. That really hit me because at 21 years of age I was in the best shape of my life and having the best time. It was shocking.

We went on to the hospital and I spoke to someone with a new spinal injury. It really cut me up because I was asking myself "Will he be one of the people that will be dead in a couple of years?" When I came back to Australia I wanted to speak to raise awareness of those issues.

The Desire to Make a Difference

I took the leap of faith in May this year and left my job. I was in no shape financially to do it. I've taken a massive risk, I've gone into debt; I've put immense pressure on myself and my husband.

I've always had a desire to make a difference. In my early 20s I thought the only way to make a difference on a big scale is to get involved in politics with one of the two major parties. Over the last 12-18 months I have realised connecting with people on a personal level by sharing my story can make a difference. I wanted to do something with a more lasting impact so I put together my e-book on Resilience. The book provides a checklist of things to consider not only in coping but moving forward in life, and I'm also running a training program.

A Model of Resilience

My model of resilience is based on the process of self-reflection and analysing the past 21 years; asking "What have been the key personal qualities, things I've done, or worked on, which have enabled me to not only cope with situations, but to get results and move forward." I came up with a nine key approach to 'resilience'.

I guess 'resilience' is the ability to keep getting up. It is about bouncing back, or returning to the original form. I've always had a target in front of me. When you're having a bad day the nine keys are the pathway to something different. It could be as simple as "I'm going to enjoy dinner tonight." And it could be something as huge as a life-long goal, or a combination of both.

The first thing I try to impart to people is that resilience is all about personal responsibility, particularly for people with disability who may feel that the disability is their fault. I've tried to impart to people that no matter what happens what we make of it from this point forward is our responsibility.

We have a choice; we can live our lives being angry and bitter and trying to blame others, but that doesn't get us or anyone around us, anywhere. Hey, things go wrong and for the most part we didn't ask for it, it wasn't our fault, that's been a huge part of it for me – taking responsibility. It's been really empowering.

I'm proud of my life, where I'm at now, and where I'm going. Although I'm still not satisfied with it, I'm really excited about it. I love married life. I'm very proud of my husband. I'm doing a Certificate 3 in Micro Business for people living with disability, and a Certificate 4 in Training and Assessment. The course aims to promote self-employment as an option for people with disability. I feel very strongly about that. I've dabbled in different businesses over the years, and I've got a couple running at the moment, and I love it. I don't want to work 9 to 5; I don't want to travel. I think self-employment for people living with disability removes a lot of the barriers.

My suggestions to other people

The main thing I would say to somebody who has acquired a disability is "Hey, it's not the end," and "No-one's expecting you to get up tomorrow and be a paralympian". I think sometimes people feel pressure. Through rehab you do get pushed into sport a lot, and even though I was a very active person, it felt like pressure.

The thing to remember is it's your choice what you make of your life. Setting small, achievable goals is a good way to start. You've got to have the bigger goals as well. You've got to keep pushing your comfort zones. If you're not pushing your comfort zones then you're not growing.

I think you have to have goals that are slightly out of reach, and sometimes you've got to have some you think are impossibly ridiculous. I think it's really important to always be stretching yourself. It's almost like having a personal vision statement. You've always got this thing that you live by.

I think purpose is another big thing. I didn't feel that drive to go and do things until I had that experience in the Solomon Islands, and then I thought, "This is something I can do to make a real difference."

Getting into speaking and training is great because it opens up opportunities for travel; it opens up opportunities for me to make more money than I would in "a job". It opens up opportunities to network with influential people. I want to go to more countries; I want to go to more villages; I want to improve people's lives. That's a big driver for me. I've realised I just answered the question of what my vision statement is - My vision is to improve the quality of other people's lives so that they can do the same for others.

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