

Maurice's Story

Maurice's story was developed by combining excerpts from his story on the History of Disability in South Australia website with an interview conversation

Maurice was born at Tantanoola, in south-east South Australia, in 1958. At age 18 he was working as an apprentice fitter and turner in Mt Gambier, but all that changed when Maurice had a vehicle accident. He was travelling back from a BBQ just outside of Mount Gambier on a narrow road and had to move to the side of the road to allow an on-coming car to pass but in doing so, started sliding on loose gravel, over-corrected and ended up swiping that car. A small suitcase on the back seat of the car was catapulted across the back seat striking Maurice on the back of the neck causing a C5/6 lesion which left him with quadriplegia. He sustained no other injuries.

When his Mum and Dad went to the hospital in Mt Gambier the doctor who had assessed Maurice said to them "Your son's a quadriplegic. He's the worst I've ever seen. He'll never be able to do anything for himself or anyone else for the rest of his life." In retrospect that has been a great motivator for Maurice.

Maurice remembers lying in the Royal Adelaide spinal injuries intensive care area within the first week or so after the accident. He received a telegram from the general manager of Panel Board (his previous workplace) saying "if you can do anything at all after this we want you back here working for us." Maurice reflects how that automatically took him out of the sick role and got him thinking about a possible return to work. Consequently he is strongly committed to early intervention for people experiencing trauma or acquiring a disability in order to reach their full potential whatever that may be.

Rehabilitation was intensive and included a focus on the development of clerical skills to enable Maurice to continue a work role. Obtaining a driver's license was a major problem for Maurice near the end of his rehabilitation as he did not have sufficient strength in his triceps muscle to enable him to activate the brakes sufficiently with hand controls. Driving was to be very important if Maurice was to be able to gain a reasonable level of independence in the country and be able to return to work in Mount Gambier.

With intensive exercise and great support from his driving instructor, George Dunstan Maurice was able to eventually obtain his driver's license and leave the rehabilitation hospital. Within two weeks of exiting rehabilitation he was driving himself back to work in Mt Gambier again where he was able to undertake a receptionist/switchboard operator position.

Maurice continued to come to Adelaide to visit the Hampstead Centre for rehabilitation. He would often talk to people who had recently acquired paraplegia and quadriplegia, encouraging them to get on with their lives. The Director of the

Spinal Injuries Unit at the time recognised the benefits of peer counselling in the context of people recovering from spinal injuries and attempted to get Maurice a position at the Unit but it was obstructed by the fact that he had no formal qualifications.

Getting a social work education

The Social Worker at the Spinal Injuries Unit encouraged Maurice to consider formal tertiary studies in Adelaide. In 1982 Maurice came to live at an independent living – training house (Focus Housing) at Mile End. The Social Worker at Focus Housing, encouraged Maurice to apply for mature-age entry to the Institute of Technology (later known as the University of South Australia) to study for the Associate Diploma in Social Work.

When Maurice's application was rejected, a support worker at Focus Housing suggested a personal visit to clarify the grounds for this rejection. He accompanied Maurice and had to lift his chair up the fifteen steps to gain entry to the Institute to meet the head of school, who reviewed Maurice's application and approved enrolment. The main reason Maurice wanted to do social work was because he enjoyed talking with and encouraging others, and assisting other people who were going through the Spinal Injuries Unit.

After 3 months in the training house, Maurice moved to live independently in a unit in Old Treasury Lane in the City and commenced his studies. A group of people living with disability who had also been through independent living at Focus Housing discussed the need for a client-managed personal assistant program. This concept was innovative but had not been tried at that stage in South Australia. Fortunately the concept had support from the Social Worker in adult services at Crippled Children's Association (CCA).

Maurice and Trevor Harrison, a peer living with disability wrote up the constitution, obtained funding from the CCA and Trevor was appointed as the first coordinator of what became known as the Community Independence Association (CIA), now known as Enhanced Lifestyles. Maurice became a member of the Board of the Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association and in 1983 he was appointed to the Chair.

After graduating with his Associate Diploma in Social Work in 1985, Maurice briefly took up a position as peer counsellor with Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association working mainly in the Spinal Injuries Units. It was there that he met Sheila, his future wife, a physiotherapist on a working holiday from the UK. Maurice is now married to Sheila and they have three children, Sophie, Martha and Tom.

Maurice considers that it was really lucky that he chose to do Social Work, because students are required to do a lot of self-evaluation and get to understand their own baggage and value systems. He reflects that was just so important in terms of starting to feel okay and comfortable with himself as a person living with quadriplegia who used a wheelchair.

Maurice remembers that he worked really hard and got high grades for all his work, again it was just that 'wanting to get a good result'. Maurice says "When you go

through a life-changing experience like that, I think you do re-evaluate who you are and what you want to do and what you want to be able to achieve. And I think that in itself, is an important thing that probably a lot of people don't get forced to do".

Maurice credits social work as providing him with the skills to be able to critically analyse and understand a situation. This has assisted him to be confident in being able to talk about an issue such as public transport and to understand it from different perspectives.

Employment roles

What followed was a series of paid positions which have significantly influenced issues affecting the lives of people living with disability. Initially Maurice was involved in a social work position with the Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association to set up a 'peer counselling' service at the spinal injuries Unit. He then took up a role at Regency Park Centre as an adolescence services Social Worker which co-ordinated the movement of people living with disability back into the community and supported accommodation.

Also at this time he had a child protection coordinator role where Maurice was involved in helping to establish a protocol for investigative interviewing of children with speech and communication difficulties. Maurice then completed a bridging course at the University of South Australia to obtain his degree in social work. He graduated with a bachelor of social work in 1992.

In response to recognition of a lack of advocacy for and by people with a lived experience of disability Maurice was then involved in a review of what was then 'Commonground Bulletin Board', a great initiative of the Commonwealth Government that was administered through the Disability Information and Resource Centre (DIRC). In essence, the scheme provided loan computers and modems to people with disabilities so that they could communicate on line via 'Bulletin Boards', it was a great initiative to link people and break isolation.

This was also at the time when Disabled People Australia and the SA branch encountered funding issues and folded as a result. These organisations were peak bodies who were staffed by people with lived experience and who advocated on disability issues. The review's key recommendation was the need to establish an electronically connected network of consumer advocates. Maurice was invited to work toward developing a submission to the Commonwealth to fund the network. Consequently the Disability Rights and Advocacy program (DARE) came into existence at Disability Action Inc.

Maurice was instrumental in the development of a nationally recognised advocacy training program in 1977 which was launched by Sir Ronald Wilson, the President of the Human Rights and Equal opportunity Commission (HREOC). The training aimed to equip people with the skills to advocate for themselves and others. Maurice considers advocacy to be really important for people living with disability.

He refers to a quote by Sir Ronald Wilson who he describes as an amazing mentor and, someone he greatly admired. Being an ex-High Court judge Sir Ronald talked

about his love of advocacy, saying “I can think of no greater role in life than being an advocate for those who don’t have the ability to advocate for themselves”.

Maurice says “it’s a great goal to aspire to, to try and affect positive change. I just think it’s a great role for anyone with a disability. There’s lots of work to do, there’s plenty of work to share around, and I would say: pick up one issue that you really want to influence and want to make a change”.

Maurice has played a strong social activist role in the drive for accessible public transport in Australia. People with disabilities had long been aware of issues they experience in not being able to access transport and how this impinged on every aspect of their lives: education, employment health, shopping, entertainment and social activities. He played a pivotal role in initially lobbying governments, then lodging a formal complaint under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) to the Australian Human Rights Commission.

Maurice and two other complainants were assisted by Helen Finch who had a background in law and who was instrumental in formalising the complaints. A full Hearing took place in October 1994 and Agreements were reached that included the government committing to a trial of accessible buses, to only purchase accessible buses from that point and to develop an Action Plan. This government Disability Action Plan would outline how all transport would be made accessible to all people living with disability. Maurice says “This was another significant indication of the power of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). The first “Accessible Transport Action Plan” for TransAdelaide was released in July 1995.

In 1999 Maurice was seconded to the position of national Coordinator of the DDA Standards Project. In this role he coordinated a range of consultations and the disability sector’s input into a range of DDA Standards such as the Education Standard (2005) and the Access to Buildings/Premises Standard (2002).

The next career move took Maurice into the South Australian Public Service as Senior Policy Officer: Disability within the Strategic Planning and Policy Division, Department of Human services. In this role he was responsible for coordinating the SA Government’s disability strategy, “Promoting independence: Disability Action Plans for South Australia”.

As Manager for Disability Inclusion in the Office for Disability and Client Services, Maurice was responsible for leading the development, co-ordination and management of a number of specialised strategies and programs. These strategies focus on the promotion of improved quality of life, access and inclusion outcomes for people with disabilities in South Australia.

Having worked in various government positions Maurice has developed an understanding about the best ways to progress issues affecting the lives of people with disability at a political level. “I think it’s just a great shame that a whole range of people with a disabilities are denied opportunities. There are some very good and sound economic arguments for the importance of people with a disability being given the same opportunities as everyone else. We need to use those arguments because

we know that the ways governments make decisions is quite often based on economic rationalism and a whole range of economic arguments.”

Voluntary work

As a background to his paid employment Maurice has played a significant voluntary role in community affairs, representing people living with disability. From 1998-2000 he was the National Disability Representative on the national taskforce on Accessible Public Transport Standards and the Federal Attorney-general's Steering Committee on Accessible Public Transport.

In 1998-99 he was appointed by the Minister to chair the Disability Advisory Council of South Australia and also to carry out an evaluation of quality services for people with disabilities in South Australia. He chaired the Physical Disability Council of Australia from 1988-2004, and was elected Chair of the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations in 2004. In this role, Maurice has represented the Australian disability sector in meetings at the United Nations headquarters in New York to develop an International Convention on the Rights of People with a Disability. The UN Convention was formally ratified by the UN and had over 60 Countries (including Australia) sign up to it on March 30 2007.

Personal factors

When asked about the factors that have enabled him to achieve such a productive life, Maurice says “I've always had a pretty competitive nature, as a young person growing up in Tantanoola. I was self driven and if I was playing sport, tennis or football, I always wanted to win.

Maurice considers that his philosophy has been important in the way he has chosen to live his life alongside disability. “All too often disability is seen as a great tragedy – “a traumatic experience” In reality doors have closed, but other doors have opened up, and I always say that to people “You can look at a whole range of your interests, your skills and abilities, and there are always opportunities. It's just a matter of what you do with it.

Everyone's got choices. I remember my dear old mum's philosophy was: “Well, you don't have to look far to find someone worse off than yourself.” I guess that's the main thing – there's always going to be challenges and opportunities for us to take on board. And you can sit back and be an observer in life, or you can sit back and say “I want to be a participant. I want to be a part of that.”

Maurice also attributes his continued success to his partner and her support over 25 years and said the following. “My wife Sheila and I met back in the late 80's when I had just commenced my work as a Social Worker and she was a Physiotherapist on a working holiday. Sheila has always been there to support me and has always appreciated the need for me to have a go at things and not rescue me when I'm trying to do things. She has always had high expectations of what I could and should do as an individual and in no way ‘smothered me’. We as a couple and as parents have also had many challenges over the years and overcoming these and reflection on the outcomes has been reaffirming to us.”

Maurice was involved in the development of the National Disability Strategy and believes: “It’s all about, people reaching their full potential and having the least restrictions, and services getting out of the way of people. There are obstructions that go on, and the several assessments and the several levels of decision-making that happens with some of these organisations, whether it’s a public or an NGO organisation. These organisations need to get out of the way of people.”

When asked about the reasons he has been so active in public life Maurice responds “I’d go stir crazy if I had to sit at home, where I just wasn’t out there doing things that I want to do. If I look back and reflect on the little goals when I was going through in rehabilitation, when I could first learn how to pull my sock back on, getting dressed in the morning, etc. It might have taken me 10 minutes or something to do it but it was an achievement that “Wow, I’ve got that. I can do the other one. You’ve just got to break it down into little goals where there are major challenges. I think success breeds success, too.”

Recognition for his contributions

In June 2006 Maurice was made a member of the Order of Australia, an A.M. for his sustained service to people with a disability and contribution to development of national Standards for Accessible Public Transport. In December 2002, Maurice received a National award from the Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission for his work on developing Transport Standards. He received a Centenary Medal in 2001 for “powerful advocacy at a National level for people with a disability”.

Suggestions for others in a similar situation

I think it’s important to set small, achievable goals, and achievable tasks that are going to make a difference to yourself. Having a really close look at what the changes are that you would like to make in your life, and the ways that you can go about that? You may need some support or assistance in doing that, but the first part of the step is recognising what are the changes that you want to make, what would make a difference and really understanding that.

It might be identifying what are the smaller things, the things that I can do, to work towards that. I used to look around and see people and think “Wow, how did they get to do that?”. I remember seeing a chap by the name of Gary who was a quadriplegic. He was a bit lower level than me, but he was incredibly strong and was able to do things physically I never thought that were going to be possible for someone like him or like myself. I learnt that he didn’t get there by accident. He had to do the hard yards.

Gary started off by pushing his chair a couple of hundred yards around the block, and then getting further and further, building up and up. I know that I always wanted to do things, like independently transfer myself in and out of the car, and the way he did it was the only way it can be done, slowly building up the strength. I used to push around the block and then I’d start pushing out on the road, and then I’d be doing 3, 4 k, or 5 k pushes whenever I got the opportunity, to try to build up my strength. So start with small achievable goals and work toward an ultimate goal.

I've always said that people with disability have to be problem solvers. They've got to learn how to overcome things. And they've got to problem solve out of necessity, to get on and do things and to work out how they're going to do it. I just think you do need to be innovative. You really do need to problem solve. It might be about doing things differently. Sometimes you actually get there in the end, the same as other people do, but you might have had to go about it a whole different way.

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