# Jarad's Story

*Jarad told his story in a recorded interview. This is the transcript.*

I have high functioning autism. It's a developmental disability, on the scale of being mild to moderate, and I was first diagnosed at age 3. I have these varying degrees of impairments, but a lot of invisible conditions.

I was born with cataracts in front of my eyes, and I had to have surgery to have them removed. They removed both the cataracts and the lens out of my right eye, so the pupil is still there, but there is no lens and my vision is very blurry. There's a low degree of optical vision or sight in one eye. But with my left eye, the cataract there has laid dormant ever since I was a few days old and so it hasn't grown yet, and they hope that it won't.

I'm living in a garage which was converted into a unit, like a retreat. My sister originally lived there for a number of years, but I shuffled right in there after my 18th birthday. It's on the same property, but it's not attached to the house.

I spent seven years in a special school in Sydney, run by the Catholic education system. We moved back to Adelaide as my Dad worked for the Royal Australian Navy. He retired, so we settled back to Adelaide permanently. We moved to Oaklands Park, and I went to school in Hove which was then known as Townsend School. I was there from 1999 until 2004 when they relocated to Ascot Park where their new school was known as the South Australian School for the Vision Impaired (SASVI).

There's been a lot of obstacles and barriers I have had to overcome or navigate over throughout my life, but it's affected me the most during my adolescence, when I had to be socialising and forming friendships. I've had a lot of hits and misses over the years and there's been a lot of inconvenience—like distance—and the challenge of trying to keep the lines of communication open, because with the way I talk it's hard for some people to understand what I'm actually saying. When I was younger it hurt a lot, but I know that's what it's like for a lot of people, with their personalities and their egos, and you can't overcome that.

It hasn't been easy to overcome the challenges in my life. I had to really shake up my own inabilities to formulate how I can be myself both in the public eye and behind closed doors. I had to decide how I would react in particular situations and scenarios, in other words—how to control my disability.

I've had to decide how to formulate normal types of conversations. I had to be effective, ineffective, open or closed, and I think I owe a lot to what I've learned through tertiary education, where I found support. I went to TAFE in 2009. It helped me a great deal, and I'm really appreciative of TAFE and what they've given me.

In 2009 I did Certificate 3 in Disability Work at Panorama (which is now closed due to cut-back of services within the entire institute). In 2010, I went to City Campus where I did a Certificate 4 course. I managed to muddle my way through the political components—which I'm really passionate about because I hope to get into politics one day—as well as social activism and human rights. But I didn't do that well towards the end of the first semester because I found it hard to understand some of the rhetoric and jargon within the law. Recently I did the last area of study at Noarlunga Centre Campus (Certificate 4 in Youth Work).

My short term goals are to complete the Foundation Studies Program in which I recently enrolled, through a collaborative partnership with TAFE SA South Institute, and Flinders University. I'm doing Topic 1 at the moment which is about academic writing, and knowing how to select the right words and the right phrases, and how to use the right corrective spelling and grammar. I've got three more topics to do.

I think I can do well, and with support and assistance, I should find my way through and hopefully negotiate an opportunity into an undergraduate degree in 2012. Another goal I have is hoping to get into more advocacy and activism roles in the political arena. I'm hoping to do more of my local political work and become a registered member with the Dignity for Disability party where Kelly Vincent is the elected member in the Legislative Council.

The thing I am most proud of is crushing the stereotype that people living with autism are stuck in a room where they just cry and whinge all through the day and all through the night. That's the greatest achievement I think I can ever accomplish.

I came to that probably halfway through doing my second course at TAFE because I was thinking: "How come I got to be here?" I never thought someone with my vocabulary could actually join the TAFE course in Disability Studies, let alone Youth Work.

I know I'll do well in disability work, because I have ample experience with that. I could not have known I'd have the mechanisms and the skills I'd need to make sure I work well within those departments and sectors fluently and credibly, even with my particular disability and impairments.

I think I owe a lot to a leadership training program which is currently run by the YMCA and the state government. When I was working with my local Youth Advisory Committee, I was with them for the local Council of Marion from 2005 to 2010. The coordinator at the time was Sally Sutton, and she alerted me about this program. I got involved with it, and I've really enjoyed it.

It took me a while to feel more confident and more secure with my skills in speaking in public, being able to write speeches, and having the opportunity to be able to get up there, be myself, and give my absolute best. If it weren't for that I wouldn't have been involved in task forces, I wouldn't be signed on as a Training Officer and be looking after up to 100 participants (along with some other members in the same portfolio of course).

The factors that have enabled me to do all this include knowing that there are people out there who didn’t give up on me; they knew that I had potential, and I had the drive to go to anywhere I wanted. I can give you a few names, but it all started with my Mum when I was at a young age.  She knew that I could go further even with my disability.

I then went further with a few people that I know from organisations, both in Sydney and in Adelaide. I was given the chance to get the skills to go out and be able to find myself and learn about myself, through programs that have mentors. I think I owe a lot to two particular mentors.  They really opened my eyes to a lot of opportunities, and gave me a lot of insight as to what I can be as a person, and a sense of myself as an individual.

I think I have a different personality to others—having a very unpredictable sense of humour. It is too out of this world, and too controversial.  But it’s all about having a difference and not following the crowd, not melding into the blandness of normality or sameness, because you do not want to be the same person as other people whom you have known.

There were a lot of teachers that didn’t understand about my disability, didn’t understand what I needed in that particular environment. I remember crying so many times when I was at home because everyone was picking on me, didn’t understand me, didn’t want to get to know me. I’m greatly amazed that I have turned out to be the person I am.

I have a strong interest in radio and music and television, and I like Australian drama. It goes back to when I was a kid watching all those afternoon TV shows on the ABC—great classics like Lift Off, Round the Twist, Genie from Down Under, even some of the older classics that were around when I was too young to understand what they were about. I could work out who the characters were but I was at an age when I wasn’t able to process what was being said. There were a lot of shows like Clowning Around, and a few other golden gems of Australian television.  I like just having my say, talking, arguing, debating—I do quite a lot on Facebook these days.

I have acquaintances, but there are not enough close friends. They’re too afraid to step over the line to be my long-term companion.  How can they go about accepting my disability and my situation and the problems that I have had to live with my whole life?  I feel alone sometimes.

To other people in similar situations I'd say it’s taken a lot of ‘hard yakka’ and a lot of exhausted persistence to get where I am.  I had to ruffle a few feathers, knock on a few doors.  We had to lock out a lot of wrong assumptions and myths that were made about me. It takes a lot of work and a lot of dedication, and you will feel exhausted, and you will feel defeated at times, but you cannot give up.  You cannot give up showing that you can go beyond the disability, beyond your impairments and beyond what people thought you would have been when you were first diagnosed.

You can lie in bed, cover yourself with sheets and quilts and blankets and just immerse yourself into the blackness that is your lousiness and your bleakness.  Or you can just persist and you can find out how you can overcome these barriers and not give those people the satisfaction that they have won—because they will never win. I think I am a lover and not a fighter. I'm only a fighter with my voice and my words, but physically I am a lover of everyone and everything.

I have a lot of ideas; I know I can talk my head off. I look through articles and the comments and the opinion pieces, and I get my own perception of answers and how I can put my own spin on the words.  That's why I bring my own interests and my own issues to what I'm interested in.  I'm very influential with disability awareness and gay rights, but also protection for children who are being mishandled, mistreated, neglected or abused.  I'm very interested in that particular area.

I'm a real go-getter of what I want to do. I'm not going to sit around just lazy and feeling sorry for myself all day long. I hope to see that in the next decade, people with any particular disability get up, rise up, stand up and be counted for what they can bring to the actual interface of opinions and theories and thoughts about what makes a disability, and how it materialises, and how it doesn't.  That's what I'd like to see in the next few years.

I would advise other people to have a lot of patience, to get a lot of training about how to control the urge to really let your fears and your anguish out, to make sure you don't let them out too hard or too fast.  But I think for me the main issue is just making sure that you are careful and you don't give those who don't know who you really are the wrong impression, because the worst thing that can happen is, you can create this entire portrayal of someone who's not actually you.

**Postscript:**

*Soon after telling this story Jarad won the Pride of Australia Award - Young Leader category.  This is what Jarad had to say about winning the award:*

I didn't actually think I would get the medal.

It was something that came at a time when I didn't think I was getting enough encouragement for what I've done over the last few years.  So when I got the initial opportunity to get nominated for the Pride of Australia Medal, I just grabbed the opportunity. A couple of organisations nominated me as a Young Leader, and if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have gone to the ceremony back in August. I wouldn't have had such a peculiar moment in my life where I could be awarded and congratulated for what I've done.  I haven't ever had a prestigious award before.  I've seen friends and acquaintances and family go to awards where they get all the trophies and the medals and the accolades.

Getting the award shows I am able to excel much more than I would have done in the past.  In the past I thought that I was in a low grade, and I couldn't get to a high grade where I could be awarded for what I've done.

I was shocked to win the award.  It kind of threw me. I would have been happy enough to have been a finalist.  I wouldn't have been disappointed or upset.  I would have got up saying, "Yeah, I was a finalist for the Pride of Australia medal!"  But when my name was called out, I felt a rush of pride that I had been picked!  They picked me!

Why did they pick me? They managed to look beyond my particular communicative style and see the skills and abilities that I possess. It was a huge shock. I was overwhelmed. I was so happy

With my family there were tears everywhere.  They were highly emotional and pretty intense because they knew I was hoping to get it and were thinking that if I didn't get it I would be upset, or that they would just make the usual comments saying, "You did your best; you actually got there in the end."  But, when I did get the medal, they were so blissfully happy for me and there were tears from everyone that was there—tears of joy.

My memory was so joyful and happy that I managed to win such a high prestigious award, and they still can't get over that! I will definitely look back at this moment in my life that I was awarded as a Young Leader. Everyone did their bit to make sure that I got this medal, and I can feel quite gratified and appreciative, and quite honoured.

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