

Presentation at launch of Autism State Plan (21st May '09)

Good morning and welcome to Minister Neville, distinguished guests and all who are present today. It is an honour to be invited to speak today on behalf of all people with Autism and I commend the Victorian Government, Autism Victoria and all other key players for the work they have done to implement the Autism State Plan. Today, I am pleased to share with you a little of my experiences with Autism.

I was diagnosed at the age of two and a half years. Early on I had significant issues with communication, hand-eye co-ordination and I appeared to be 'closed-off' from the outside world. During the early years of my education at a special school, instead of spending my lunchtimes socialising I would flap my arms, flick sticks and eat dirt and sand. I was so obsessed with red to the point where I had to wear red clothing and had tomato sauce with all kinds of food, including once with apple pie, which I got in trouble for. I would also throw a temper tantrum if things didn't go my way, such as when everyday routines were disrupted or when I wasn't wearing red clothes. Particularly when I was wearing my navy blue school uniform. I also hated loud or deep noises and I particularly loathed the sound of the school bus. I would associate this sound with the colour black, a colour that I loathed. These are all common issues that people with Autism encounter.

Over the years, however, my parents, family and many other people in my life have motivated me to be where I am today and to not let the challenges of my Autism prevent me from leading a fulfilling life. They are to be truly thanked for that. I will forever appreciate the way they have set an example in giving of themselves and motivating me to do the same. Over the years, I have learnt to build confidence in myself, develop new skills and use them to give back to others in the community. I have been blessed with so many opportunities in my life to not only rise above the distractions of my Autism, but to also open my eyes to new experiences and challenges.

During my years at a special school, the teachers and support staff put in a tremendous effort, so that I would begin to interact socially with the people around me. As the goal for me was to integrate with the mainstream community, I had a dual enrolment between my special school and a mainstream primary school in order to have the same educational opportunities as the majority of students. My integration aide worked extremely hard with me to be independent with my learning, to the point where by the time I reached grade five, I graduated from my special school. I have since spent the rest of my education in mainstream schools and am now studying a Bachelor of Graphic Design at university. Over time, I have ceased my obsessions in the colour red, as well as in other topics such as cars and historic buildings. I have managed to stop flapping and flicking dirt around and have enhanced my social skills.

I completed my secondary education at Catholic College Bendigo, otherwise known as CCB. While my teachers and fellow students did a fantastic job at looking out for me, an integral part of my success at school must be attributed to my parents insistence upon regular support meetings. At these meetings my parents, teaching staff and I discussed progress at school, planned for upcoming events and dealt with issues or potential problems before the issues could become too large.

I was also given many opportunities to help others in the community. One experience I will particularly remember is my trip to a remote outback school, where I walked in solidarity with those less fortunate than me and where I became more focused towards the injustices of the world, rather than me being the 'centre of the universe'. It was also a trip that helped me to adjust to the unexpected, develop self-confidence and strengthen my relationship with others. The kids I played with empowered me to see the light-hearted things in life. Not only were these people's lives better because I took the time to help them but I felt enriched as a result of this opportunity. In 2006, I was honoured to receive the CCB Catherine McAuley Award which recognised my strength of compassion, non-judgemental service and a sense of welcome towards people. On Australia Day last year, I was deeply privileged to receive the Young Citizen of the Year award for the City of Greater Bendigo.

I intend to continue my studies and voluntary work, including involvement with St Vinnies and in the near future, volunteering on a new soup van being set up in Bendigo. Most importantly, I'd like to live life to the best of my ability and not let my Autism get in the way. Despite the difficulties I encounter on a daily basis, I am blessed to have many opportunities and to live a fulfilling life..

We must bear in mind that despite what I have achieved, I would not be here today without the help I have received throughout my life. I will also continue to need support in the future and we must remember that Autism is not exclusively present in children, but is rather for life! The Victorian Government in partnership with Autism Victoria have taken a great first step to implement the Autism State Plan and have truly recognised that Autism is for life! I commend them for this initiative.

Thankyou so much for inviting me to speak to you today. It is truly an honour to be present at this launch and I look forward to a better future for people with Autism.