



Spotlight on Disability

Words: Geoff Crockett Photos: Contributed

— — — — —

On the Sunshine Coast, the 2016 Census data suggests that nearly 6% of the population or about 17,000 people, are living their lives with severe or profound disabilities and require help to make it through their days.

For some, their families provide that support, for others, it comes from people who have chosen to step into caring roles and do all that they can to help others live their best lives.

Whether it's in the disability field or in aged care, the demand for carers is incredibly high.

A quick search of online employment portal seek.com.au as this article was being written reveals 189 available positions for carers on the Sunshine Coast – a swag of potential jobs unmatched by any other field.

IFYS Acting Service Manager, Fifi Larnach, says the sector offers plenty of opportunities for those who love to help others.

For as long as Fifi can remember she's been serving others in one way or another. Growing up in a Greek family she said it was just what was expected, especially for the girls, who always served food and drink to guests and relatives who visited the house.

That grounding and sentiment has followed Fifi throughout her life and career.

She said that even though she chose at first to work in finance at the Reserve Bank in Sydney, she still found a way to serve by bringing homemade scones and condiments to team meetings and making sure everyone was happy and fed.

Now, as the Acting Service Manager of two IFYS care houses operated by Supports by Design, Fifi says she makes sure her own staff don't miss out on a good feed. Ever since she first moved into the disability sector and started to host team meetings, she has arrived with homemade food to share. At IFYS she is famous for her scones.

For Fifi, the scones are a way of breaking the ice and taking some of the formality out of meetings.

'They're an ice breaker. Everyone loves to come around the table and chat while sharing food, it just works,' she said.

In her current role at Supports by Design Fifi works each day with support workers and people whose disabilities dictate the need for some assistance to help them along their way.

She sees her role as serving the carers and their clients – to identify their needs, skills and preferences and works to find the right combinations that will help all involved to enjoy their interactions, to learn and to grow.

It was a career counsellor who first pointed Fifi towards the disability sector, when she and her husband moved to the Sunshine Coast and she was struggling to find part-time accounting work that would allow her to support her son and family, while adding to the bank account.

'The counsellor said to me – instead of 'head' work, why don't you look for 'heart' work,' Fifi said.

While the idea of taking on the role of a formal type carer might have seemed odd on the face of it based on Fifi's previous work experience, it made a lot of sense when she



considered she had been supporting her husband with his disabilities for many years.

After looking into it, undertaking study and earning her carer's certificate Fifi said the doors had opened, and they had been open ever since.

The experience also helped her to realise that everything she had done in the past, whatever she'd come across in her life, could all be used in any role she did – and the same applied for other people too.

'Everyone has different strengths and skills – sometimes we just haven't found their gift or their skill yet,' Fifi said.

After more than 20 years working in disability Fifi said she was passionate about helping people understand that people are people – disabled or otherwise – their wants, needs, skills and desires are the same as everyone else.

'Some of the people we work with have different skills – they may not be able to talk well, but they pick up on language and find a way to communicate.

'Our job is to understand what each person's goals are and figure out how we are going to help them to get there.

'It's about being person-centred and always striving to help our clients to take that next step.

'For some, leaving home for the first time, it's about learning how to be a tenant – learning life skills they can use for the rest of their lives,' Fifi said.

'We walk alongside them, asking them "What do we need to do today?" – it's a long-term approach.'

For those with disabilities and their carers Fifi said it was important for them to know that there was support available and people who were ready, willing and able to help.

She said she had found there was also a lot of heart in the sector and anyone looking for a rewarding job that made a difference to someone else's life, caring roles were well worth investigating.

When it comes to rewards, Fifi says the team always shares a smile when one of the people they are helping hits a goal they've set, however big or small.