



Spotlight on Disability

Words: Geoff Crockett Photos: Contributed

The chance to solve a problem and help another person have a better life are the underlying elements that have kept Rod Bell going in a career path he 'fell into' nearly 30 years ago.

While he was born in Cooroy, Rod and his family moved to Toowoomba for business when he was just two years old and it was here he built his early life, studying at school and university while working all manner of jobs, including time in the construction industry, to pave his way.

Having completed a postgraduate degree in Education, on top of his initial degrees in Applied Science and Psychology, Rod said he began to hunt for a job and landed in Stanthorpe.

'When I graduated, I started to apply for work as we had a baby girl who was 5 months old. I was happy to try anything,' Rod said.

A job managing a day service for a large charity looking after disabled clients came up and Rod took it on - marking the beginning of a three decade journey in the disability sector that continues to this day.

'We moved out there and I managed the day service. The people who had managed it previously were really forward thinking; they were truly ahead of the game. My job was to build on that.'

Rod said the Stanthorpe community was amazingly

supportive of his group and went out of their way to help the clients feel part of the broader community.

'There were two women at that centre who had been together since the day they were born - the community knew these young ladies - they could walk down the street and say hi.

'The staff there were great. I learned a lot from them, as well as from the clients.'

Highlights from those early years included helping one client, who had come to the centre as a ward of the state, to learn sufficient cooking skills that he was eventually able to move out by himself and have more independence.

Another was assisting a client to fulfil his dream of becoming a motorcycle courier. Rod said three staff at the centre took on different elements of the project, one supporting with safety requirements and obtaining the motorbike licence, the second sourcing work and setting up a business idea, and the third helping to teach the client about saving and how to plan for the project.

While it took several years, Rod said eventually the client was able to secure his license, buy a bike and run his own business delivering pamphlets to letterboxes around the town. He said the locals always gave him a wave, and the client could not have been happier.

After seven years in Stanthorpe, Rod and his wife, Jacqueline, made the decision to move back to the Sunshine Coast to access the opportunities here, particularly schooling and future work prospects for their children, Madeline and Alex.

Rod worked with the State Government developing opportunities for disabled clients to better access the community, and continued to work with them across a range of roles for the next 18 years.

'You're trying to give clients community access. Guys with no language. We would just take them for walks - that sort of stuff.

'There was one guy who loved blues music. I'd take him to a blues night once a week. Since he was there all the time, the crowd knew him, and when they'd had a few drinks they would get him out there on the dance floor. You could see he loved it; there was just this big grin on his face.'

Rod said working in the field for so long, he'd seen just about everything.

While there were many clients who had been born with physical or mental disabilities, he had seen a good deal of 40-year-olds come through the doors looking for help to be independent after having strokes or developing MS or similar conditions.

'One of the skills you develop is that ability to solve problems. It's about coming up with solutions, problem solving, being creative and thinking outside the box. It can be really, really, challenging that way.'

It's not all fun though with Rod quick to point out that some elements of the work can be repetitive and bureaucratic, and that you do have to go looking for the wins occasionally.

'It's incremental. You don't always see significant change and improvements. When I used to work in building, you finished a building, it's done. This is different.

'We had one client who secured paid work collecting glasses in a local club. That took years of work to get them there; you have to celebrate the steps along the way.'

In one role in particular Rod was working with families who had turned to the State Government for help caring for a disabled family member. He would listen to their concerns and then try to find the right links to help them out.

He said these carers were amazing and sometimes there was nothing you could tell them.

'The reason they were struggling is that it's bloody hard work. You'd say, "I can't tell you anything else you can do - because you're doing everything you can" - there is no simple solution.

'They are some of the loveliest people you'd ever meet. They're dealing with all the extra responsibilities that come with the role of a carer, and you'd go out to visit them and they would have made you a slice or cake for morning tea.'

A quirk of the career that Rod has noticed over time is that it tends to be mainly women who apply for the jobs.

'Disability doesn't attract many males. Quite often I have been the only male on the team or in the building,' Rod said.

With the rollout of National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the move for numerous disability services to be undertaken outside of government, Rod's previous role as



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Regional Manager of Disability Services finished a few years ago.

He is now in the process of building the talent, culture and services of Integrated Family and Youth Service's Supports by Design business - an accredited NDIS Service Provider focused on helping disabled members of the community to participate in social and community activities, to learn the skills needed for daily life such as managing money and meal preparation, and to access the equipment and the skills required to live independently.

'Everything in the disability sector is about building relationships. So you invest in them, then you can provide this really tailored service for people.

'What we bring is that I carefully recruit people who have experience and understand disability. We ask "What are the goals for the person - what's the outcome?" and we keep this front of mind.

'It's a personal thing - it's a personal service.'

Having been thrown into leadership roles from the start of his career Rod said he now really enjoyed working with his teams to help them to grow and to understand how to get the best out of a team.

'People need to consider it as a career; you can earn money, have a great life and job satisfaction. You can make a career, like I have, just helping people have a better life.

'I've done a whole lot of other jobs. Work is work. What makes a job great is the people you work with and the satisfaction you get from your job.

'I've worked with some really lovely and fantastic people, and our work has improved people's lives.

'Our intention is to make people's lives better and on the whole, that's what we've done.'

As we head towards the end of 2020, Rod said he is looking forward to helping more people next year, and to spending time outside of work with his family, and working in the shed at home in Palmwoods with his son as they try and rebuild a WB Kingswood Ute that's currently in 'a million pieces.'