Spotlight on Disability

Words: Richard Bruinsma **Photos:** Contributed

Lessons from a long-term support worker: keep learning, always think 'outside the box'

After more than 23 years working as a Disability Support Worker – the last 16 years with Supports By Design (IFYS) – John Webber candidly admits he still has plenty to learn.

But he wouldn't have it any other way.

In fact, John is convinced that if anyone makes the mistake of thinking they've 'made it', thinking they've learned all there is to know about the industry, then you can almost guarantee that they'll 'come a cropper'.

'You know how it is in life, you think you've got a handle on something, and then something happens that throws you in a 180-degree turn and you realise that you weren't as smart as you thought you were,' John explained with a laugh.

'And every day, you realise that you're still learning; every day you go to work, there's something that happens and you think, "Geez, I should have been up to speed on that" or "Crikey, that's new, I've never heard that before".

'You've got to have that attitude about you; I'm not saying that I have it in spades, but you've got to have that attitude where you understand that you yourself are still learning that whole time.'

John certainly has learned plenty throughout his career. He spends his work days in Supported Independent Living, supporting people with autism to live their best lives independently in the community.

He helps by providing support in their homes, and also accompanying them on outings, shopping, and providing guidance when they interact with other community members, retail staff and the like.

'Initially, when I first started in the role, it was because I was out of work and there was a job available, but then, the more I worked in the position, I really enjoyed watching somebody's life improve,' John said.

'At first, I was very uneasy around people with disability, and in hindsight it was because I just did not have the knowledge.

'I was very fortunate to have really good management who provided incredible training. I quickly realised that the people I was working with were just people with some hurdles in life that they could overcome with some support.'

John has felt particular personal and professional satisfaction when he gains the trust of people he is caring for, and helps them to learn new life skills.

'Even watching somebody who you've worked with, where they start making eye contact with you, and begin to interact with you, that's the reward for it all,' he said.

'You build up a rapport and you get to know each other, and believe me, the people who have disabilities – especially people with profound autism – they have no speech, so they've learned all their lives to read body language and how to gauge people, and they will work someone out in the blink of an eye.'

John recalled one positive outcome during a meal with one of his friends with autism, after a simple request to use a spoon.

'I asked him why he needed a spoon, and he replied that at home his mother always gave him a spoon so he could eat his peas,' John explained.

'I showed him that if he put some mash potatoes on his fork first, then he could stick the peas in the mash.

'With a little assistance he managed this and to my surprise, in the crowded eating area, he put both hands in the air and yelled at the top of his voice, "Yes I don't have to use a spoon anymore".

'He had identified that using a spoon at home meant he was not the same as the rest of his family... something his family didn't think was important, but it was very important to him.'

The simple interaction changed his friend's life. It also reminded John that solutions to challenges are often found way out of the box, a realisation particularly significant when communicating with those who are non-verbal.

'These people have had to go through life not being able to tell others things like, "No, I don't want that" or "I don't want to go there" or "I want that" and so on,' he said.

'Can you imagine how that would make you feel? And what would be your reaction? The frustration.

'So, when someone is a bit frustrated, it just may be because what we think is important may not be important to them.

'It could be something so far out of left field... the colour of someone's clothing, or it could be the perfume they're wearing, things you wouldn't even think about – this is the difficult part of the job, you can't think in a mainstream way, you must try and think outside of the box.

'What I've learned through the years is the support person can't put a timeframe on any life learnings and behaviour changes. If you do, you have just set the person up for failure; it must be open-ended – a week, a month, a year, never ending – it must be up to the person's ability to determine the time it takes.

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'This requires patience every day, along with empathy, understanding and a raft of other things. It can be very challenging, it can be very difficult, but it can be very rewarding at the same time.'

As for his dedicated 23-year achievement, John has no desire to give it up any time soon.

'Like I said, you must be in a frame of mind where you yourself understand that you are still learning. There are always surprises around the corner, things that you haven't encountered yet,' he said.

'The object of the game is to help somebody integrate into society as much as possible, and the payback is watching somebody, step-by-step improving their life, learning skills, experiencing a better understanding of something that helps make their life better.

'I think when retirement time comes around, I don't think I will retire completely. I think I'd still like to keep working a couple of days each week.'