

25 years after Search Workshop October 1987

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The story of Search starts in 1987 with Queensland Parents for the Disabled. This small group of parents knew of the hope in the hearts of people with disability that their lives will be valued, and the love of their families to help them follow their dreams. In the back rooms of the Deaf school and at our kitchen tables they hatched a plan.

A flame of hope had been lit like never before with the Disability Services Act, that our children could have an ordinary life like their brothers and sisters. For established services, the new vision was challenging, unrealistic, fanciful and risky - and they resisted.

Many families resisted too - fearful they would lose what little gains they had made.

But the flame was lit and those who believed life could be better were ready for action. So how did this happen? These are my recollections as a young mother of three small children – you will have your own memories – please share them tonight.

Leadership is where it is –not where it is meant to be.

Apart from a few small organisations, Queensland was held in an iron grip by the few large disability services. They held most of the funds, set the direction of services and had significant political and social influence. *(Anne will speak more of this time)*

They were in a position to lead, to inspire and to change. They missed the opportunity.

Instead it was a network of people with disability, family members and professionals who took the lead, separately – a true social grass roots movement.

Taking courage to speak of an alternative

The conversations first happened in our homes, at small meetings, across kitchen tables – of what was possible. We felt subversive, told we were disrespectful, we should be grateful. “Be careful or you will lose what you have.” For the fearful, there were many opportunities to fade away and continue as before.

Then some surprising acts sustained us. At a time when information to families was controlled by service providers, (there was no internet then) a young librarian in Canberra began to send out photocopied inspirational articles directly to families and people with disability to their homes. They just kept coming, and his mailing list grew and grew. We stuck those articles on our fridges, handed them around at meetings – we realized having information was power – having a vision of what was possible was powerful.

The Office of Disability came through with workshops on principles, possibilities, and ideas – and they made it possible for people with disability and families to come.

Young professionals sought out families and people with disability who wanted change. After Anne Cross finished her day's work at the Commonwealth Rehab Centre, she would drop in to my home, I would harangue her, she would help bath my children and suggest we could work together for a better future.

Working with allies

At this time, people with disability were untrusting of families, families untrusting of professionals – until we understood the power of alliances, of working together. Now this is a tricky one. There were at the time many opportunities to work with others. Many of us had sat in on advisory committees and service client organisations, in effect, to legitimise the status quo. So what were the signs of this new alliance?

I sensed a true alliance when we met easily together in humble places, at home, over a meal together, in the back room in a service that by chance was available. The powerful and the humble sat together as equals. The talk was urgent, the mood full of potential, the topic was vision and the key phrase was, “why not – let's do it” and we felt a communal responsibility for the action. It was thus that Search workshop was conceived.

Vision

Now at this point I want to talk about vision. For families this was the starting point and the continuum. I knew what I did not want. I remember the first thrill of a positive vision that frightened me with its power, making my hair stand on end. This is what happened at Search.

A daring thought about what might be possible – and perhaps we can work together towards a collective vision.

One cannot “un-envision”; once that vision is named and shared – the power is unleashed.

So twenty-five years ago, Search named a vision; it was then courageous. Looking back it seems timid. We have gathered together in true alliance since then, to close institutions in the 1990s, to name a vision for inclusive education, and recently, through Blue Skies, to garner the support of everyday Queenslanders towards the inclusion of everyone. The vision of Search has moved forward building on individual and co-operative acts of many people, who felt its power and “gave it a go”.

We have, however, seen the vulnerability of the vision for a good life; inclusive education, open employment and housing assistance continue to be eroded. We see the segregation and grouping of people done with greater sophistication, through poorly conceived short-term fix-its. Visioning is more; it is a careful, tenacious, courageous process, shared and tested, growing and being challenged, with a full and ordinary life for people with disability always the focus.

So in reflection on Search, we did our best by working together in true alliance. We took leadership where we were, not waiting for permission. Since then it has been a thousand acts of courage to think hopefully, to imagine better, to do things differently, and to just keep going. The outcome is clear.

Back then I could not have imagined the collective vision for the future we have today.