

SEARCH CELEBRATION SPEECH 26th October 2012

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It is not our intention to be nostalgic tonight, but rather to reflect on why 'Search' was one of those pivotal and memorable points in time that should be named (and indeed celebrated) in any reflection or history of the modern disability movement in Queensland, and to take what is important from that event in those times to our current times, 25 years on.

I use the word 'movement' quite deliberately because 'Search' marks in Queensland, I believe, the tentative beginnings of the coming together of people who at that point in time didn't know that they might be potential allies in their efforts to change the conditions that impact on, and restrict, people with disabilities from having the opportunity for an 'ordinary' life. 'Search' enabled individuals and small groups from different spheres to move from being separate and isolated from each other to come together to test their individual and shared convictions and the boundaries of what might be different if people worked together on projects, ideas and strategies, rather than soldier on in our own particular 'patches'.

Whilst at its heart, the struggles for children and adults who have a disability are the same now as it was in 1987 – this struggle is and will remain an unremitting struggle to ensure the humanity and potential of people with disabilities is recognized and nurtured - there are also significant and big differences in arrangements and possibilities that exist now that simply were not considered attainable and practical then. You need to recall (if you are of an age similar to Marg and I – remember we were quite young then!) or envision if you are that young now, what it might mean to not know any children with disabilities who had been included in regular school; to not know any people with intellectual disabilities or significant physical disabilities who had a job outside of a sheltered workshop, to not know people with disabilities who have degrees and professional lives, to not know any people with disabilities who lived outside of the family home, a 10 bed residential, a nursing home or an institution, to not know people with disabilities who were able to participate in community groups, sporting groups, arts groups other than in activity therapy centres or other specialist disability services, to not see people with disabilities out and about in the community, at the shops etc unless they were with their families or in large disability group outings. There was almost no such thing as family support;..... I could go on. And whilst there were always individuals and families that were exceptions to this, I think it is fair to say that this was the predominant and also dominant set of circumstances that faced people with disabilities and families.

This was the context, but things 'they were a-changing'...and the idea of doing something, which blossomed into Search didn't of course arise in a vacuum. (Those of us who were involved couldn't claim to be that original!)

There were some other key influences that came before Search.

The 1980's was a decade of activity and change in Disability. The early decade saw a vast array of activities and publicity celebrating disability in 1981 (International Year of People with Disabilities). This was probably the first time that there was any positive focus on people with disabilities in the media! The 1980's also saw the production of various and deeply disturbing reports in institutional care for people with intellectual disability (Richmond Report in NSW in 1983, the Beecham Report in WA and the.....Report in Victoria). This followed various reports in the 70's in some states that highlighted the lack of assistance for people with disabilities.

Wolf Wolfensberger had been in Australia in the early 80's and many senior government and non government providers were exposed to his ideas and strategies that he laid out for different kind of service system His principles of 'Normalization' together with concepts such as 'Least Restrictive Alternative' were influential for both state governments who were major providers of services for people with significant intellectual disabilities and for the Commonwealth Government who where at that point the funder of non-government services. (The transfer of this funding role to the Qld and other state governments didn't happen until 1992). So the roles of both the Qld and the Commonwealth Government were important.

In Qld, the state government's Intellectual Disability Services, following the adoption of a government White Paper, had commenced in the face of nurses strikes in the institutions, in a very systematic way, a program to move people from the institutions to group homes. A critical component to this was the conception of tertiary level of training for residential care workers to replace the mental health 'nurses' that were employed within the institutions. This work of shifting from a medical model to a social training model was groundbreaking; it recognised a belief in the potential of people with intellectual disabilities to learn and grow and to live in the community. We'd all recognise the limitations of these services today and many aspects of the reform programs stalled...but in 1980's this was a time of optimism; the commitment to change amongst the professionals who were in IDS was palpable.

At the Commonwealth level, Don Grimes was Minister for Social Security and then Community Services in the Bob Hawke Labor government. Grimes has said that his interest in disability came out of his experiences as a rural GP in Tasmania and the frustrations of not being able to get any help for families and people with disabilities. In 1981, in International Year of People with Disabilities, whilst still in Opposition he decided that there should be a comprehensive review of services, facilities and legislation. This translated in the Handicapped Program's Review which involved extensive consultation 'at the grassroots' rather than through official channels...a commitment to ensuring those affected by policies and decision had an opportunity to have a say...truly groundbreaking. Thus the consultation was characterised (rare at the time) by significant input from families and people with disabilities. Grimes talks about how this experience made him and his colleagues determined to change things. They resolved to produce a program of change and accompanying legislation. The report New Directions was produced in June 1986 and new legislation the Disability Services Act was introduced just six months later in December 1986.

As exciting as this was for those who wanted change, like any change it provoked opposition and this was particularly true in Qld where the major non-government service providers actively sought to reject and undermine the implementation of the legislation which required them to transition over relatively short periods of time (in retrospect) from sheltered workshops to open employment services, from Activity therapy centres to Community Access Services, from residential services to models of supported accommodation. Some families too were deeply concerned about the talk of independence and the 'dignity of risk' for their children.

In 1987, there was an absolute stalemate in affecting the change envisioned in the legislation in Qld. The Commonwealth was making no progress in its implementation program in the face of active resistance by the providers. Service Providers would not sign up for the change program and the Commonwealth could not spend the dollars allocated for Qld in Qld.

A beacon for change in this highly charged context was Qld Parents of the Disabled (then QPD), which had been active since 1982 to trying to affect change for families. QPD had already auspiced the development of QAI which was set to start in 1987 around the same time as the Search Conference. QPD as well as various professionals were as frustrated as the Commonwealth was that all our hopes for change were being thwarted. Amongst all of this, a small group of parents and workers found each other and started to talk about what we could do to break the stalemate.

It was in these conversations that we emerged the idea of a community Conference using Search methodology. A conference hosted by a parent advocacy group that brought together people from across the spectrum to explore a vision for people with disabilities in Queensland – now THAT was bold idea. So we used our networks and QPD took to Commonwealth Government this brilliant idea and offered to organise and host the Search Conference....a grassroots initiative in the state where nothing was happening. The funding was found very quickly and rest as you'd say is history.

Search is a highly structured, highly participative, intense process that requires people to work hard, to contribute, to keep seeking to reach shared agreement and to commit to actions beyond the conference. Participants needed to self-identify as a leader and included parents, only a few people with disabilities given there simply were not many people with disabilities who were visible and present in roles within the sector, professionals and service managers from non-government organisations, the Qld Government and the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service, Minister Grimes' advisor, a very senior Commonwealth executive, one or two academics.

We left with an agreed vision for people with disabilities in Queensland; we had hatched some plans and each of us had committed to some actions. Soon after we all got our Pink Book – a record of all we had done, a publication of this shared vision for people with disabilities and a record of the actions we planned to take.

The notion that we could have a vision was novel, uplifting and filled us with hope. The notion that we had ideas about how to break the stalemate that had arisen in Queensland that was preventing the change was tantalizing. And Search gave us an endorsement for action.. this unusual (at the time) coalition had created a legitimacy to the vision and the work that followed.

And relevant to our hosts tonight – CRU – the idea of CRU was birthed at Search and a group of people agreed to work on bringing that idea to realisation!

So in finishing our reflections tonight, we have just a few more comments that we believe have an enduring relevance.

By definition the participants in Search that are here tonight were all 25 years younger in 1987 and many of the participants were young. (Did I say that Marg and I were both very young?)...the serious point I want to make is that it was generally speaking it was a pretty young crowd who were driving this agenda. In case you haven't been counting I have just mentioned the word young or younger six times in the last couple of sentences. It's obvious isn't it if movements are to be renewed, evolved and sustained, then a critical issue is there has to be people with conviction and passion of all ages, but especially those that are younger, involved.

Search taught us about the importance of shifting from problems to possibilities; it taught us about the importance of Vision and the power of bringing together different voices and different experiences. It taught us it was OK to invite and expect people to step up to the plate, to show leadership and be involved. And of course it taught us about the importance of alliances and coalitions and that allies are not always obvious. It taught us about alliances with friendly politicians and public servants. (Actually..I was still a public servant at that point.) It taught us about translating our vision into some practical projects and strategies...some of which endured and some which withered on the vine. It taught us to be courageous and that there was much that could be done even in the face of what seemed to be overwhelming odds. Search was the right strategy for that time; it created a new dynamic in Queensland, which overtime assisted to unfreeze the deadlocks that had developed in this state.

'Looking Back' much has, we believe, been achieved since 1987. What happened at Search contributed to some of those achievements. Many individual and collective battles have been waged and there remains many more battles to be waged. Indeed one of the learnings of Search is that there are no easy or quick solutions, but that TIMELY, careful, thoughtful but BOLD actions can move things along. I think we got good value for money from it.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these reflections with you. We trust that it has encouraged you to keep nurturing the 'fire in your belly' and that it has contributed to the spirit and the hope of this celebration that calls us all to be 'Looking Forward'.