

# CRUCIAL TIMES

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## Editorial

A reasonable assumption one could have on hearing that an academic has won the Nobel Prize is that he or she must always have been a brilliant and hard-working individual who was marked out for success. At the age of 15, Sir John Gurdon, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine last year, received the following school report - 'I believe he has ideas about becoming a scientist,' his biology teacher wrote. 'On his present showing this is quite ridiculous; if he can't learn simple biological facts he would have no chance of doing the work of a specialist, and it would be a sheer waste of time, both on his part, and of those who have to teach him.' It is not clear what happened in the intervening years that changed the outcome for John Gurdon. Perhaps this criticism motivated him to work harder. He says that that report is the only document that he has ever framed. Perhaps there were other people in his life who had a more positive view of his future.

Whatever happened it is clear that John Gurdon achieved quite a bit more than what was expected of him. As it is more common that people succumb to and become the victim of the low expectations of others, this edition of CRUCIAL TIMES focuses on expectations and the link between expectations and outcomes for people who live with disability.

In the media there are numerous articles lamenting the pressure of high expectations on students, workers and citizens in the twenty first century. Unfortunately for people with disability this is rarely the problem – they are much more

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### CRU's MISSION STATEMENT

- To challenge ideas and practices which limit the lives of people with disabilities.
- To inspire and encourage individuals and organisations to pursue better lives for people with disabilities.

likely to be harmed by a cascade of low expectations. Expectations that they need someone with them every minute of the day; that they will never be able to learn or work; that they can't do anything for themselves; that they couldn't cope with love and loss. These low expectations often come from misplaced kindness and protection; from a perception that the person who lives with disability is so different that they would not want, need or be capable of experiencing the same things as their fellow human beings.

Ironically some people who exceed the low expectations of others and manage to live a fairly typical life can then find themselves in the spotlight where they are expected to do more; achieve more and behave better than their peers who don't have disabilities. If one has a disability it seems that jobs should be for life; apartments should be pristine; plans should never change.

In this edition of CRUCIAL Times you will find articles by and about some people from Queensland who have also exceeded the expectations of others. Many would not have expected Marlena to become a University student and businesswoman; nor Angelica to hold down a job and live in her own unit. The articles by these two women illustrate how they have achieved this. It didn't just happen because someone believed it could. However, with effort, some setbacks and perseverance, it is also true to say that it only happened because someone believed it could.

Chris Sarra, who is perhaps best known for his role as a past principal of the Cherbourg State School has written of this link between expectations and outcomes in the case of indigenous people. He describes his efforts to lift the expectations of the indigenous students he taught. Chris has given us permission to publish extracts from his book "Good Morning Mr Sarra" which I think provide some useful parallels with the experience of people who live with disability.

Many of us carry within us memories and interpretations of the expectations that people in our life had or still have of us. Whether or not we are conscious of these external expectations, they continue to influence who we are and how we behave. In turn they can shape the expectations we hold of ourselves and of what we can achieve.

As a young Brisbane man who lives with autism, John Buckley writes powerfully about maintaining high expectations for himself and also explores the role that others have played in helping him to do this.

When people who live with disability encounter a judging, unwelcoming world, how critical it is that the people around them expect much of them and for them. When we can't see our own talents and strengths, how important are those people who remind us of all that we have to offer and who remember the best not the worst about us? As supporters we can take up the responsibility to challenge ourselves about what is possible for people who have a disability and then to inform and educate ourselves on how that might be achieved. Too often people dismiss expectations as being unrealistic before they have even investigated what is possible. It sounds like a contradiction to say that we need to have high expectations that people will lead an ordinary life. Bridget Wickert has been supporting people for twenty-five years. In her article she describes some of the things that help her to maintain her own high expectations and those of the staff she supervises. As a parent Selina Maffey talks about having hopes for her daughter's future but not being sure if they could happen and then in time seeing her daughter Angelica's expectations for herself starting to equal and exceed those, she as her mother, had for her.

I am not sure who first said, "if you change what you see what you see changes" but I think it is a good way to describe the ever-evolving nature of the link between what we expect to happen and what eventuates. The expectations we have of ourselves are not static but can change as we succeed or fail at things and as other people encourage or discourage us. We have the power to choose to engage in the upward spiral of high expectations and better quality of life or the downward spiral of low expectations that waste lives and extinguish potential. I will finish with the wise advice of Stephen Covey – 'Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can and should be and he will become as he can and should be.'

**Margaret Rodgers**  
Director

## From the President

I am excited to be writing for CRUcial Times in what will be CRU's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year. Planning for this celebratory milestone is underway and we ask that you save the date: 13 September 2013. I am from the Gold Coast and I am also excited to see other people from around the Gold Coast represented in this edition.

Expectations, whether they are conscious or otherwise, set the boundaries for what is considered possible and what is considered "unrealistic" or "unachievable".

I have had my own expectations of what is possible in the lives of people with disability constantly challenged, especially by parents who, quite naturally, want their daughter or son to do well and live a good life. It is often a parent who has come to a planning meeting with the best idea and challenged all present to 'step up' and do their bit to make it happen.

One of CRU's aims is *to challenge ideas and practices that limit the lives of people with disabilities*. Holding or having low expectations of people with a disability sits near the top of the list of limiting practices. The work of CRU challenges this limiting practice through providing information and ideas to inspire and encourage. Recent workshops such as "Dilemmas in Supporting Choice" and "Thinking Differently to Shape a Life with Purpose and Relationships" are one way CRU challenges such practices and this edition of CRUcial Times is further input.

Displayed on the wall where I work is a quote from Lemay on Wolfensberger from 1972:

*The developmental potential of individual human beings is very difficult to assess. A person's developmental potential is only realisable in circumstances where life conditions and experiences are optimised.*

Reflecting on the quote reminds me that it takes more than simply acknowledging that we rarely know what people are capable of until they are given the opportunity to try. Their life conditions and experiences also need to be optimised! We don't want to set things up to fail. If we hold high expectations it means we have room to move. I don't mean we lower our expectations if things don't work out, but rather that we can adjust the conditions to better suit the person. We adapt, we support, we encourage, we connect, we teach, we add, we take away. We work towards getting it just right.

Some years ago I heard a story from a colleague about a co-worker in her previous employment at a school who told her not to worry about a particular young woman because "she's only going to go to programs anyway". Thank goodness that young woman and her mum rejected such low expectations and started a better conversation about her gifts, strengths, interests, abilities and resources.

In preparing my contribution to this issue, the staff at CRU expect I will send in something they can work with, but they don't take it and say, thanks Matt and then rewrite it behind my back. They work with me, encourage me and try to hone in on what it is I am really trying to say. They optimise conditions by providing ample time to prepare, setting a theme to get ideas going, they share what others are writing to give further support and encouragement. So, if my contribution doesn't quite meet your expectations as the reader... please keep your expectations high –there is a bunch of us trying to get it just right.

Cheers,

**Matt Stone**

President of Community Resource Unit

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[www.cru.org.au](http://www.cru.org.au)

• For more information about CRU • Details on upcoming events • Bookshop • CRUcial Times including previous editions

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## *Expect the Impossible*

**Marlena Katene** is a young woman who lives at the Gold Coast. While her physical disability is a part of who she is, she has dreams, goals and ambitions which have led to her becoming a business owner and budding journalist. She is nearing the end of her journalism degree and when not studying she enjoys travel, business development conferences and generally just hanging out with friends. In this article she explores the importance of expectations, their importance to her and how they continue to motivate her as she looks to the future.

What is it you see when you look at me?

What immediately pops in to your mind in the first ten seconds of our first encounter?

It would be naïve to think that you do not notice my wheelchair or the fact I don't speak. These are the physical attributes of my disability that cannot be disguised, not that I would want to. I wonder how far these physical attributes contribute to the perceptions that are placed on me. We do not get a second chance to make a first impression and unfortunately for some first impressions stick.

It is human nature to judge and these judgments can affect people's expectations for someone with a disability. With limited expectations what kind of life will occur? For someone with a disability expectations determine the *quality of life* that the person lives. That's a term that many disability services have used or still regularly use

but many still are falling behind in expectations of their consumers. When I get new supports in my life I reserve my own right to judge (this is my life after all) and think to myself.

*Do you expect me to contribute to the world as an equal?*

*Do you expect me to be a taxpayer and enter into the workforce?*

*Do you just see me as having physical needs which is why I require you in my life?*

This is how I assess whether these people enter my life or not. If they can embrace my dreams, visions and goals then they are welcomed on board to be part of the team. This team is going to support me moving in the way I want to head. As my life is constantly moving and changing directions it is vital I don't waste time with people who may place their limiting expectations upon me.

I am so fortunate my mother and many others have set high expectations for me my whole life. Sometimes these expectations were perceived as insanity by teachers (or others around them) who obviously could not see the bigger picture, dreams and vision held by my mother. They could not understand why my mother would insist I buy a recorder in Grade Three music class, and blow (some may say dribble) in it and make awesome music with my peers in a regular music class. Despite not sounding that great it could be argued the lack of noise **automatically** made me one of the top five performers.

Another example is that my mother expected me to read and get books from the library from a young age. Many torn pages, stuck together ever so discreetly with sticky tape, were returned to the library. Those high expectations continue to be important now - if it wasn't for her expectations then I wouldn't be writing this article now, or running my own business, or blogging, or studying at university! High expectations have been part of my life from a young age and remain so to this very day.

Limited expectations go part and parcel for many with a disability and too often I have heard the phrase "As long as they are happy". My life is "happy" now because of the expectations placed upon me.

There were times in my life, especially in high school, where it would have been easier to lower my expectations. Not having to complete similar tasks to that of my peers would definitely have been less stressful. While at times I would have loved to avoid the many tears I do know these are part of life.

Without discounting the need for happiness, as I believe it is everyone's ultimate goal, I ask how can we truly be happy when people lower their

expectations of us? With lowered expectations our life experiences are very limited and our reliance on others increases. My happiness comes from the many roles I have as well as my natural supports. They have taken my life to a whole new level. Having their expectations in my life have made me the individual I am. I am in the driver's seat of where my life is heading whilst being supported by a number of like-minded visionaries who offer the support I need.

When I look at why my life is going okay I look to those that have had a vision for my life from a young age. I look to those who expected me to maintain milestones and experiences despite not being able to speak and using a wheelchair.

It hasn't been an easy road and like everyone I have had my share of dramas to get where I am today. I too have had the opportunity to fail and experience negatives in life. It hasn't all been roses.

I thank God for the stability of many people, both family and friends, that has ensured support has been in place around the major areas of my journey into adulthood. Education, social and more recently career development are the big ones in my life. Many people I know with a disability would not like to be defined or known just by their disabilities and I am no different. However, as I have many other adventures and developments going on in my life, I can honestly say that my disability is truly only one part of who I am.

*"Expect a person with a disability to achieve the impossible.*

*Life needs vision, not just to be managed.*

*Start to dream and set goals.*

*Break down the dreams into bite size realities and watch lives change"*

# *Autonomy, employment and the transition to independence*

**Selina Maffey** lives in far north Queensland and is the mother of Angelica who is 26 years old. Angelica grew up in a rural community, went to the local school and then the high school in the nearest town twenty seven kilometres away. Since finishing school eight years ago Angelica has been working at a local resort in Port Douglas. In this article Selina reflects on the important role employment has played in her daughter's life and how it has led to a full life of independence and opportunity beyond everyone's expectations.

I wanted Angelica to get a job. I was not entirely convinced it would happen.

A lot of work went into seeking work experience while Angelica was at school and by the time she left school she had an extensive resume.

Prior to seriously looking for work Angelica had a gap year. During this time she travelled overseas, volunteered and travelled with us to Sydney – each experience offered Angelica learning opportunities and with these she gained confidence.

I was advised by a friend to look for a big employer because smaller businesses require their employees to do many jobs, some of which may be too challenging for my daughter. Angelica was linked with an employment agency that did preliminary work to get Angelica ready for work. At the end of the gap year I was on the lookout.

Whilst at the markets one weekend I ran into a business manager of a Five Star resort which happened to be the biggest employer in town and after a discussion she encouraged me to arrange a meeting. As requested Angelica took her resume and to our surprise we were met with a very positive remark; "Well you look like you have done work experience everywhere else, I think it's time for us to see how we can help you". Angelica was about to turn twenty years old and was keen to work.

The disability employment agency took over and from that time as a parent I was left out of negotiations with the employer. If I had any issues I discussed them with the agency.

The employment agency and the resort did research and created a position for Angelica. Soon after she started she was offered a trial in "The Hub" between the kitchen and the restaurant where the glasses, cutlery and dishes were managed. A few modifications took place to make the job more suitable for Angelica and she took to the position remarkably well. Of course there were difficulties – like lots of tempting food in the staff canteen but over time any concerns were dealt with and resolved.

When there were 600 or more people for breakfast in peak season some of the High School students or back packers joined her in The Hub. I was told Angelica took charge and helped her transient team manage The Hub efficiently.

We lived 1300ft up in the mountains and Angelica worked down on the coast. The forty kilometres travel to and from work each way was a challenge. I had asked around and had been directed to a wonderful lady who started work at a similar time to Angelica. She arranged to pick Angelica up at 7.00am three mornings a week and later helped us link with others who worked similar shifts when her shifts changed. After a while Angelica had five individuals to call on for a lift.

As I was working, Angelica soon took charge and rang to confirm who was picking her up. She would inform me of the plan as we rushed out the door to drive four kilometres to the end of our road to drop her off for the thirty five minute ride. With one driver who loved music, they sang together all the way down the hill usually wearing sun glasses bought by one of the drivers who noticed Angelica did not like the morning glare. I can't speak highly enough about the kindness and generosity of these great people over a period of four years – there was never a falter and Angelica made work on time each day.

For the return home, Angelica had to catch two buses. She would ring the bus company on the way down the range in the morning and book the afternoon bus to the closest town. On the bus, Angelica often took care of the young Primary School students who were on their way home from school and this led to friendships. Angelica had an hour to wait to catch the High School bus up the range in the afternoon. It wasn't perfect but Angelica managed with only a few incidents.

One incident was when she decided to cross the busy road to purchase a red slushy (drink) to take on the bus. Determined not to miss the bus she ran over the road without her normal caution and got knocked down by a truck. Luckily it was only enough to frighten her and twist her knee and of greater importance to her, she saved the red slushy drink. So many people came to her aid; people who were in cars, people walking down the street, High School students who knew Angelica – one benefit of an inclusive education throughout Kindergarten, Primary and High

school. With all of this natural support available to her I was one of the last to hear about it, despite the fact I was working over the road. It is moments like this that remind me how important it is that so many people know Angelica and take such an interest in her welfare.

Work helped Angelica to put some structure into her week. She was very proud of her work and loved meeting new friends and going to work parties. After Angelica had been working for four years she no longer wanted to spend so much time travelling every day.

It is moments like this that reminds me how important it is that so many people know Angelica and take such an interest in her welfare.

Despite never wanting Angelica to move out, when she was offered a unit that was affordable and in the right location I took her to have a look. Angelica walked through the unit and didn't say anything. I thought that meant

she was not interested. A short time after arriving home, I heard her dragging the suitcase down the stairs – "Let's go" she said. And that was it; we were onto the next stage of the journey.

Angelica has been living independently, coming home at the weekends for the last two years. She now walks to work. She loves managing her life and has learnt a lot more skills. She is never late for work and is the most dependable reliable worker.

The disability employment agency mysteriously signed Angelica off and she was advised that she was no longer registered with their service. I rang after trying to understand what had happened, and I was informed they were not

providing support to Angelica because she was well supported in her work place and had been stable in the job for a significant period.

For the first time, after six years of employment I was able to see Angelica working, as the Assessor for the Supported Wage needed a witness. I met Angelica's work friends and witnessed the complexities of the job. Needless to say I was very proud as she took charge of the tasks; working in a team who obviously love her, value her and depend on her. Despite staff and management changes at work I am confident that there are enough people who know how to support Angelica. She is just one of the team, permanently employed.

In Angelica's early life I worked hard to find the latest research to support Angelica to communicate and learn. I believed that everyday life in the local schools and community with her peers would be the only place Angelica would learn what is expected socially and to live as a member of our society.

As much as I may have dreamed, I never expected Angelica to manage her life so efficiently. She is forever reminding me of her appointments with property agents, medical appointments, dates and times of travel to Brisbane. I have become so blasé I recently forgot to check if she knew the correct time to get a taxi to the airport in Brisbane to catch a plane to Cairns. She managed regardless. This is remarkable for a young lady who could not add one and one reliably when she left school,

could not write even a short sentence and had difficulty working out past and present when telling stories - and she was never able to keep her room tidy!

With money, Angelica now asks for the correct amount and then shops - coming in on budget without support. She keeps her unit clean and tidy. She writes using a program on her computer. Slowly her written sentences are increasing.

Angelica is engaged and is planning to get married to her long term partner in 2015. She has lots of fun visiting him and planning for David's visits. He works, so is aware that Angelica needs to maintain her work routine during his visits - as Angelica supports David's work when she visits him in Brisbane. I have no idea what the future holds, however I do anticipate that Angelica will treasure her life - a life determined by her and not limited by having a disability - in her case Down syndrome.

It is important to say that Angelica's job was the first important routine after school that demanded a high standard and a commitment. She has sustained varied relationships at work and in the community. The skills Angelica has learnt from work have flowed onto the rest of her life. Real life has been Angelica's best teacher, while the community has supported Angelica to enable this to happen.

Challenges will always be a part of Angelica's life but together we can work through these.

The skills Angelica has learnt from work have flowed onto the rest of her life. Real life has been Angelica's best teacher, while the community has supported Angelica to enable this to happen.



# *Expectation: An invitation or condemnation*

*John Buckley is a creative writer who has experienced the good and bad aspects of expectation. It is his wish for others to recognise their role in the limiting and expanding of expectation for all.*

***Expectation may be a determination.***

***Low and high find their way to create a conclusion.***

***High expectation promotes aspiration, innovation and inspiration.***

***Low expectation leads to devaluation, condemnation, a cessation of aspiration.***

***Expectation for the silent brings us from separation into an equal nation.***

I think we all feel the weight of expectation. For those living with little, it can be the total of life. To have little, but to hope for better, makes us better. To live without expectation is to live without hope. Humans need hope for a better future.

Expectation can be overwhelming for some, but to have the weight of no expectation is a sentence. It condemns the expector and the expected. It limits and controls. It removes the choice in a way not readily seen. It is an unseen, often unspoken, but always-present sentence.

I live with the struggle of expectation. Finding a balance constantly challenges. To rise to expectation is often difficult for me. It is much easier to confine myself within the barriers of low expectation, the barriers of low self-esteem, the barriers of my autism. These barriers stagnate life.

The locking of expectant barriers lessens all of us. We are lessened by our inability to aspire, our inability to experiment. We are lessened by our inability to expect and be supported. We are lessened.

Expectation need not be a weight. It can be an invitation: an invitation to grow, an invitation to explore, to seek, to realise. An invitation is without demand. It is accepting of refusal, accepting of disinterest, accepting of fear. An invitation asks, not demands. It accedes, not condemns. It offers freely – offers the freedom of acceptance, equally with refusal. It offers, not demands – so should expectation be.

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# Expectations - The highs and lows- how far have we come?

**Bridget Wickert** currently works in Queensland as part of a large organization. Bridget has worked in special educational settings and several services across Queensland and New South Wales. Bridget's interest and deep desire to work differently comes from a strong sense of justice, inclusive practice and a belief in seeing difference as uniqueness.

Thinking back, I remember walking past the special school on my way to college. We as students were encouraged to cross the road. I didn't cross the road; I was fascinated by the faces looking through the fence, watching our antics as we carried on with typical teenage behaviour. I can only imagine what expectations these students had of themselves and what expectations their families were encouraged to have.

During that same time, my best friend had a sister who was born with Down syndrome. There was no "special" associated with this little girl. She had chores, she was spanked, she wrestled with her siblings and she played in the street with the rest of us. The expectation was that she would be treated no differently and so we did just that. We knew enough to make adjustments where needed but without any formality, these just happened.

It was not until I began to work in educational settings and services that I realized that it is not just chance that decides whether people are on the outside watching the world pass them by or in the middle of things like my friends' little sister. Organizations do not always share the same expectations or beliefs as say a family or even a community. Families

and community work and think in a different way to systems.

I am employed as a Family Resource Coordinator within a large organization. Part of my role is to facilitate essential skills training for support workers. I promote values of integrity, strength and commitment which encourage belief in the individual and a desire to work creatively.

Organizations do not always share the same expectations or beliefs as say a family or even a community. Families and community work and think in a different way to systems.

A common frustration I hear from workers is around having to work with groups of people in a system that lowers expectations for the sake of "accommodating more people for fewer dollars". My response is to encourage them to work one person at a time – within the group if necessary. By focusing on an individual's gifts strengths and abilities, we can develop roles as opposed to activities. Primary roles, such as mother, father, daughter, son, brother, sister, are a good place to start; and then to reflect on how this

person's life looks in relation to a person of similar age and stage of life. How can "real" life be incorporated in the planning?

Expectations are an important aspect of these roles. When talking about the most vulnerable people in community we must raise the bar and

say that everyone, as individuals, deserves to have expectations placed on them, be that as a contributing member of the family, the community or society in general. Starting with the greatest need, who can fill that need? Is it a professional, a family member or the community at large? I often ask the question: what would you or I do to fulfil this need?

If we continue to offer service just for the sake of outputs and funding models together with an expectation that this is what families want, then we aren't seeing the individual but the disability. Our expectations are that this is for the good, but we have to ask – what is being achieved and who is in fact gaining from this?

I encourage workers to use person first language, to see the person for who they are and to explore the needs of individuals as language and labels can lead to limitations. The language of "special" conjures up images of difference. When the word special is put before what should be ordinary and typical, then how can we expect change?

This issue of language is important to consider in a structural sense as well. In service world the buzz word "outputs" can easily be used when what is really happening are achievements, great and small and these achievements should be celebrated. This should be the top agenda item and it is important our language reflects this.

In an equally important aspect of my role I work alongside families and individuals to identify what is needed and then to facilitate formal supports for them. I make it a priority when

meeting a family to discuss possibilities, opportunities and their vision(s) for their family member with disability. I acknowledge and encourage the role of family, friends and other informal natural supports whilst respecting the natural authority of families.

It is important I remind myself that I am not the first service provider to have come into their lives. If I stick to what I believe, if I don't only talk the talk but really walk the walk then interest follows - interest then desire, a desire to work differently. When asked how I stay true to my values and beliefs I quote Gandhi... "*Be the change you want to see in the world*".

It is in meeting families and individuals that I appreciate what has gone before and how this is linked to low expectations. Attitudes such as

"that's good enough" or "we should be grateful for what we get" are examples of how higher expectations are slowly quashed and compromised. Social Role Valorization refers to this as "wounding".

In many instances there is much unpacking to be done as the expectations have typically been in the hands of the service providers. If I were to unpack my own life, then

the expectations placed on me when young and up to this day are clear... I may not have met all of those expectations and it has not always been perfect but I have had many experiences, met many people and been exposed to many opportunities. I remember my childhood with fondness, and share my life with people who love and believe in me.

Then if we take a person born with disability, life

*In service world the buzz word "outputs" can easily be used when what is really happening are achievements, great and small and this should be celebrated.*

may have looked very different: began with a diagnosis, grieving, guilt and then referrals to services and systems. The expectation is special school, programs, special workshops, which can then lead to isolation. The "wounding" continues until such time as a higher expectation is produced.

When we shift the power and control to the individual then we will see the expectations, and in turn standards, raised. When the individual is writing the plan, hiring and firing and setting the standards for quality of work, then we will see true person centeredness.

Let's think "normative" or even "natural" in terms of expectations. When I enter a shop I expect good service and all that this entails. Families must approach a service with a "quality" mindset and one that respects their family member as an individual. Can we expect quality service? Will our family member learn and grow, connect with the community and build skills to afford them all that life has to offer?

We can all make a difference by making it our mission to find what makes this person tick and what is important to them. In subtle and unassuming ways we can reinforce that their abilities far outweigh any disability. We are all capable of amazing feats if we are exposed to

all that life has to offer, if we are supported creatively, subtly (almost invisibly) and only where needed. Families know this, they are just living up to or should I say down to expectations. If we are truly in and of community we will realize that "natural" expectations are placed on each and every one of us daily. Natural adjustments will occur and natural freely given relationships will also occur as a result of these interactions. So this is where all people need to be, in and of our community.

In my 25 years of experience working alongside people, I have witnessed the highest expectations where there are rich, natural supports, not always just by family but when people are living in their community; embraced and accepted as contributing members of society.

*"A ship is safe in harbor, but that is not what a ship was built for" – William H Shedd.*

You can hide yourself away from the world, you can avoid doing anything risky or out there, but that's not what you were put on this earth to do. You were put here to be the best person you can be and that means taking risks by hauling anchor and sailing out into the uncharted open sea from time to time.

*If we are truly in and of community we will realize that "natural" expectations are placed on each and every one of us daily.*

# *Stronger and smarter*

## *Excerpts from Good Morning Mr Sarra*

**Chris Sarra** is a Queensland educator who is probably best known as the Principal of the State School at Cherbourg, a former Aboriginal Mission north of Brisbane, from August 1998 to February 2005. When he started the school was not functioning effectively, as shown by the poor results, low rates of attendance and a very high turnover rate of teachers. By engaging with the local community and applying his framework of “Stronger, Smarter”, Sarra led a dramatic change in the culture and environment of the school which in turn lead to greatly improved outcomes for its students and their community.

This series of excerpts from the autobiography of Chris Sarra highlight how a systemic culture of low expectations leads to people expecting less of themselves.

**Sarra’s experiences at Cherbourg highlight the restorative nature of a culture of high expectations and how this influences people involved in all levels of the system. It also shows that expectations are linked to people’s sense of themselves, their place in community and their potential as human beings.**

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**In this excerpt Sarra reflects on the value of education and how his college lecturer’s approaches, beliefs and attitudes influenced him as a student.**

I loved what he had to say and how he said it. He is a real teacher, and one of the best. I would meet regularly with him to discuss my progress and he challenged me constantly to think deeply about what I was learning. Intellectually Gary grabbed me by the scruff of the neck in one hand, and with the other he shined a light on my entire world, forcing me to see it differently. Gary showed me the “hidden curriculum” of schooling and the “hidden agenda” of society.

On one occasion Gary urged me to do an assignment about my mother’s education and contemplate what opportunities she had access to. The idea was to see how this may have enhanced or stifled my own efforts in school. It

was a great idea but I wasn’t sure I was ready for what it would reveal. Mum told me that she loved to read and had dreamed of being an archaeologist. It was never going to happen, though, as she was only ever allowed to go to school until Year 3. When asked why, she said “I guess they just thought of us as uncivilised natives and that we weren’t capable of learning”.

This floored me to some extent, and it got me talking with my older brothers and sister about their experiences at school. Tracie said, “Remember that old hag we had in Year 2? She would make us sit at the back and say she was going to bring a bath tub in to wash these Aboriginal kids because they stink!”

As I tried to imagine what this would do to the spirit of a six or seven year old, how it would make them feel about school and the people there, things started making sense to me. I began to see aspects of my own past as I hadn’t before. I saw more clearly the circumstances: I had been sold short by people with low expectations, I had sold myself short with limited expectations of who I was and what I could achieve, and I didn’t know I’d done this.

I recalled the Year 11 maths teacher... hand[ing] back a test and jokingly [saying] to the class

“Sarrah got seventy-five per cent! Must have been an easy test!” We all laughed, myself included. He was a good man and I really liked him. I’m sure he wasn’t being malicious but in his jest he sent a message that he didn’t even know he’d sent: “I didn’t really expect you to get seventy-five per cent!” At the same time, I was receiving a negative message about myself that I didn’t even know I was taking in.

***In the mid 1990’s Sarrah was lecturing at the University of Southern Queensland in Toowoomba. He describes the experience of accompanying student teachers on a visit to the school at Cherbourg.***

The school was depressing, as there was rubbish everywhere, broken windows and kids ran all over the place, sometimes in highly dangerous areas. The principal and her staff would sit down with our teacher trainees and tell them why it was like this and how hard it was to teach the kids at Cherbourg, that it wasn’t a normal school and that we had to have different expectations for these children because they were so different. Something was telling me that it didn’t have to be this way. I knew from personal experience that if you have low expectations of people then they are most likely to deliver on that. Similarly, I knew from personal experience, that if we have high expectations, children respond to that, regardless of how impossible things might seem. Somewhere inside I was wrestling intellectually with the fact that these teachers had been here for a long time even though it seemed like they really cared for the kids. Some had been there for more than ten years. Maybe this was the

best we could expect from them! If this was true then it left me with a sense of despair and hopelessness.

We heard stories about children not even getting to the end of primary school. We saw a school in chaos and completely dis-engaged from the community. In the face of all of this it was easy to look at the attendance data and student performance data and believe that the Aboriginal people of Cherbourg did not value education.

There was something paradoxical about this, particularly given our earlier conversations in the day when we met representatives of the Cherbourg Council. Men like Warren Collins, CEO of the council, and Ken Bone, the mayor, both spoke passionately about the need for good-quality education as a means to a positive future. The real question to ask, I suppose, was what existed in the school that was of any value?

At the end of our stay we got back on the bus and headed home. I was physically tired, and mentally exhausted from the immense complexity we had just encountered. Could this really be the best we could expect?

**In 1998, Chris Sarrah became the principal of Cherbourg State School. Here he is talking with members of the Cherbourg community about what motivated him to take on the role and his vision for transforming the culture of the school.**

I told them we had to create schools and

I knew from personal experience, that if we have high expectations, children respond to that, regardless of how impossible things might seem.

classrooms that could “untrick” Aboriginal kids so that they didn’t believe that being Aboriginal meant being on the bottom. We had to get them to understand that they could be high academic achievers as much as anyone else. We had to get children to feel good and positive about being Aboriginal and not conform to some kind of negative stereotype to somehow prove they were “Aboriginal”. I also said that we had to challenge teachers to see Aboriginal students more positively and with potential, we had to challenge teachers to see themselves differently and with the capacity to make a difference in the lives of their Aboriginal Students.

***As principal, Sarra started to implement some changes within the school designed to raise expectations. In this section he describes being challenged by teachers who felt that he was being “unrealistic”.***

It was becoming increasingly clear to me that we could lift the school, but only if we had enough people on the team believing it.

Senior teachers were trying to explain to me that it was necessary for us to adjust our expectations. When the District Office sent out a skills checklist for students in the region I was keen to see this executed across the whole school. I sent the checklist to a few teams I had established, only to have it sent back with a note attached saying, “we think this is too advanced for our children and so we are working on another checklist that is more suitable”.

It was so frustrating to see such toxic trash coming from those who were supposed to be the experienced teachers in the school. I’d ask why

we had to endure failure and such endemic disengagement; the answers coming back were not good. All the things I had heard from them pointed the finger of blame at someone or something else.

***Along with support from elders and the broader community, Sarra eventually got the school to challenge these low expectations and create new opportunities for learning that had not been considered possible before. Here he is reflecting on what it meant to raise expectations – both for himself and the school community.***

They understood that while this was about raising our status and sense of blackness, it was not about putting down white people. Understanding and embracing one’s power is never about putting others down. In fact, by putting others down, we put ourselves down. We also understood that if we didn’t get kids to understand that being Aboriginal meant they could be strong and smart, then the society we lived in would somehow imply to them that they were inferior. We all got that our children were much more than this.

This was about offering a way of being that was different from our sense of being in the past. It was a more honourable way of being with more integrity.

This was about offering a way of being that was different from our sense of being in the past. It was a more honourable way of being with more integrity. It was a way of being that was more authentic and closer to the truth about who we are as Aborigines, Australia’s first people who carried the blood of the oldest human existence on our planet.

***Good Morning Mr. Sarra by Chris Sarra (University of Queensland Press, 2012) is available at all good bookstores***

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# **DATE CLAIMER**

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