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THINKING ABOUT...

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valued Roles



BELONGING MATTERS BELIEVES THAT ALL PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO PURSUE A UNIQUE LIFESTYLE THAT IS PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL, RELEVANT AND TYPICALLY INTERTWINED IN THE COMMUNITY.

MORE THAN AN ONLOOKER! HOW VALUED ROLES ENABLED JACK TO FINALLY TAKE HIS PLACE ON THE STAGE AS A MUSICIAN

by Glenys Mann

Glenys Mann has a background in primary school teaching and is currently working and studying in the School of Education at The University of Queensland. Her long-term interest has been inclusive education and she has worked in voluntary and paid positions with parents and teachers, supporting them to include students with disability in regular classes. Her knowledge of Social Role Valorisation (SRV) has come through the informal mentoring and modelling of other parents and allies, formal training with the Brisbane organisation Values in Action, and through practice, trial and error!



The night my family went to the school's annual Celebration Evening to see my son receive an award was a very significant evening for us. Although my son Jack had attended Celebration Evening many times, both as a supportive brother when he was younger and then as a school member when he followed in his sisters' footsteps at our local high school, this was the first time that he himself was an award winner.

Celebration Evening was an important and exciting event of the school calendar. This was the night when the school community gathered to acknowledge and honour the achievements of the year and to award students for their academic success, effort, and commitment and contribution to the school. By the time my son earned his right to walk across that stage, my family had attended these evenings many times. I had felt

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happy and proud over the years to watch my daughters receive their certificates – and to join with the school community in applauding them for their accomplishments. This time we

were there for Jack. How he too came to be an award winner like his sisters is a great example of the power and importance of valued social roles, and is the subject of my story.



This tale of Jack's begins when he was in Year 9. My family was at Celebration Evening as usual. We were sitting at the side of the auditorium as the Year 9 students were called to line up for their awards. As Jack watched his friends line up beside us, he whispered to me, "My turn?" He did not understand why his

classmates would be lining up without him! With shock and some shame, I realised that it was a very good question. Here was a highly valued night in the life of the school when students were acknowledged in public and embraced, as it were, by the whole

school community. It was time he did have a turn, and I was dismayed that I hadn't thought about this before.

The effect of Jack's simple question was felt immediately. At first, I felt for him and his hurt and

bewilderment at being left out that night. This was quickly followed by a strong sense of the potential and importance of Jack being an award recipient like his sisters and so many of his friends. Firstly, this role would help to embed Jack's place as a student in the school, and more so, mark him as a valued and contributing student. Secondly, it would position him very strongly alongside his peers in front of the whole school community. And thirdly, it was important for his sense of identity and where he belonged - not sitting as an onlooker with his parents, but up there on the stage as an active participant in the proceedings.

Once I had made up my mind, it was a matter of how I might help to make it happen. Most importantly, I knew that the role had to be authentic. I wasn't interested in a token gesture, as Jack was already in danger of being seen as the charity case of the school. An award for achievement seemed out of reach for Jack given the requirements. An award for effort? Not Jack's strong point, so that was out too. This left the awards for commitment and contribution.

Yes, here was potential! I spoke to teachers about the requirements for a commitment award. Music

was a long-term interest and passion of Jack's, and when I heard that being a member of the Concert Band made a student eligible for an award, I knew I had my target!

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So, what would it take for Jack to authentically be a member of the Concert Band? The thought was a little daunting at first. It would mean early morning rehearsals, and Jack liked to sleep late! It required a degree of musical skill, and Jack was more enthusiastic than skillful. It meant that he would need ensemble playing skills, however paying attention and concentrating were not strong points! And most importantly, performances were very public affairs and the potential for things to go wrong in front of a large audience was a very stressful thought. Clearly, before anything else could happen, I had to raise my expectations and deal with my doubts and worries.

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Once I recognised and resisted my own hesitation and fear, helping Jack to become

a band member was surprisingly easy. Believing that it was possible and that he could and would learn, I approached Jack's music teachers and the head of the music department. Fortunately Jack had a strong,

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positive relationship with his instrumental teacher. She believed in his potential and was committed to assisting him to learn what was required to be a genuine member of the

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band. Other teachers, including the Concert Band conductor, were also supportive of the idea and before we knew it, we were setting



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the alarm for 6am for Friday morning band rehearsals!

As Jack took on his role as a Concert Band member, I felt humbled and proud of his efforts, and happily surprised at his development as a musician. He took his responsibility seriously and never once wanted

to stay in bed when that alarm went off. Jack's commitment to those rehearsals was so great that when he was sick on

a Friday, it took all my ingenuity to keep him at home. His abilities as a musician improved constantly (with the help of targeted teaching and support) and his skills as a band member were exemplary.

In spite of my trepidation, Jack stood with other percussionists,

a very exposed position, and followed the conductor, playing his part with confidence and concentration. He moved between instruments with ease and looked the part in his band uniform. Jack sat with his bandmates before and after the performance, and any assistance he may have needed was offered freely and easily by fellow members of the band. Although I must admit to a sense of relief as each performance came to an end without mishap, I was also filled with an enormous sense of love and pride, and thankfulness that I didn't allow my fears (and low expectations) to get in the way of pursuing this role for him.

Through his position and experience in the Concert Band, Jack became more firmly embedded

in his other roles as musician, music student, classmate and friend. In his senior years, when

teachers were struggling to imagine how Jack could meaningfully participate in general classrooms, music classes were an obvious and successful choice.

Being a music student opened the doors to other student networks in the school and to experiences like music camp, an invaluable opportunity to socialise with friends. I do not believe it is an accident that two of the friends that Jack still sees regularly (four years out of school) were fellow music students.

Their common interest in music

continues to open up opportunities for Jack. A long-term friendship and understanding of Jack enables them to comfortably offer any assistance that he might require when they attend music concerts and festivals together, and gives me peace of mind knowing that he is in good hands. This is an enormous gift.

Jack's life has often been messy and confusing. Many times I have been uncertain about the way forward, and have needed to go back to what I have learned about SRV, and particularly to remind myself of the importance of valued social roles in Jack's life. The principles of SRV have helped me to order my thoughts, to make sense of what is happening in Jack's life, and to remember what is worth putting my energy into. They have provided me with a firm base from which I have felt better equipped to go about making decisions. Importantly, I have developed a

strong degree of trust in what SRV has to say, because I have found so far that what SRV

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describes has been very true for Jack and for us as his family.

And so finally, in Year 10 and subsequent years in the school, Jack did get his turn as the recipient of an award for his commitment to

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the school Concert Band, an award worked hard for and well-deserved! He too lined up in the aisle with fellow award winners, and crossed the stage to receive his certificate and shake the hand of the principal. As he stood on the stage with his classmates and the applause erupted around him, I don't know who was beaming more, him or me!

