

**ADDE**

Australians for Disability and Diversity Employment



**NEWSLETTER**

## **ADDE Newsletter October 2007**

Quote of the month:

**"Can you employ a blind bus driver?"**

**"Well, you can actually, if she can do the job. The point isn't whether it's a woman, or a blind person. The point is whether the person can do the job." (Ms Scott-Parker, founder and chief executive of the British-based Employers' Forum, The Age, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007)**

Read the article from which this quote came from, further into the newsletter and find out about how attitudes of employers can affect the job seeking success of people with disability and diverse backgrounds.

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**While** people's stories about their struggles in finding employment are the main thrust of our newsletter we have some positive items this month to enhance your insight into disability and diversity employment issues.

**Peter** informs us about the great developments within ADDE around funding, the research project and the business plan project.

**A report** from the ADDE Diversity in Employment Research project outlines the first stage of the project, namely an online survey to be distributed to over 170 disability organisations to find out the level of employment of people with disability within their organisations.

**Milly's** story about her disability and employment is both distressing and uplifting. A good news story indeed.

**I always knew** there was a good reason to read the Business section of The Age newspaper – this next article about "Blind bus drivers syndrome" shows the efforts by some employers to become more informed about disability employment issues.

**Another twist** to the stories out there about the brick walls facing many of us when trying to improve our future job prospects – the health and safety factor!

**Find out about** an agency in Melbourne trying to improve the employment prospects for people with disability. Their contact details are included.

**Enjoy your read and email me with your comments, questions or YOUR STORY.** Kathy Leitch ( Editor) [kathy\\_leitch@hotmail.com](mailto:kathy_leitch@hotmail.com)

## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

It has been a while since our last newsletter, because so much has been going on we have not made sufficient time to sit and write it down, so here goes.

The National Forum on disability and employment held 18 July was very successful with nearly 30 representatives from national and state networks sharing their perspectives on what was happening around employment and disability. All the presentations are on our website [www.adde.org.au](http://www.adde.org.au).

Many thanks to Australian Ethical Investment Ltd for their financial support for the forum, and for a further grant this financial year to progress this and other projects.

Our major research project has finally commenced, and we are looking forward to the findings and recommendations, and to some positive improvements in employment opportunities for people with disabilities in the disability agency sector resulting in the medium and longer term.

The other major undertaking we are engaged in at present is the development of a business plan for ADDE. We are pleased to announce that Diversity at Work will be assisting various members of the ADDE committee to develop this business plan.

Peter Rickards

## **RESEARCH REPORT**

**ADDE starts major research project after nearly two years of hard work to get the funds required.**

**This exciting new project promotes diversity in employment in the disability service sector in Victoria, but hopefully will have positive outcomes Australia wide.**

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The Diversity in Employment research Project is being commenced with the Equity Research Centre currently compiling a list of over 170 disability organisations to target for the first part of the research – an on line survey, which will be promoted early in October. The project is being advised by a Reference Group comprising representatives from ADDE (Australians for Disability and Diversity Employment), ACL (Action for Community Living), AFDO (Australian Federation of Disability Organizations), ACE (peak body for Disability Employment Networks), several key disability organisations and the Equity Research Centre.

The survey will collect hard data to provide evidence about the range of existing employment policies and practices within disability organisations.

Towards this end, the second part of the project will also use a series of case studies to show how organisations within the disability sector have tapped into the advantages of employing people with disabilities. The case studies will highlight how various organisations approach their recruitment and employment practices, including developing policies for people with disabilities. This part of the research is scheduled for November.

The project's ultimate aim is to boost employment prospects for people with disabilities. In this sector of the Australian economy

The project has been jointly funded by the Lance Reichstein Charitable Foundation, the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust and ANZ Trustees.

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## MILLY PARKER'S STORY



Milly Parker spoke at the Bear in Mind West meeting on June 8. Her story follows:

In it, she talks about:

- her car accident
- how having a brain injury changed her life
- her dog biscuit business, Happy Yappers
- why working from home is good for her
- people's attitudes
- problems getting information she can understand
- wanting society to value all people with disabilities

At the meeting, Milly also talked about joining TAC and government committees, trying to make life better for people with disabilities.

Milly has a website: [www.happyyappers.com.au](http://www.happyyappers.com.au)

### **Milly says...**

In 1992, **I was 21 when I was involved in a car accident.** I was resuscitated and intubated at the scene and airlifted to emergency at The Alfred Hospital.

The next thing I can recall was waking up several days later in intensive care on a life support machine. My only form of communication was by pointing at letters on a board to form words that those around me had to write down. I remember pointing out on the board "tell the girls I will be home in time for

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next weekend's Grand Final Party". I had no idea what the years ahead held for me.

**I was later diagnosed with an Acquired Brain Injury.** I attended rehab in Bendigo at the Anne Caudle Center for the next year.

**My life changed so dramatically.** I went from being an extroverted, 21 year old Accounting student with a social life that would rival any Hollywood Starlet, to being to afraid to cross the road on my own virtually overnight.

**I was unable to return to study** as I now had trouble with memory, retaining new information, attention span, complex planning etc

For years following the accident constant reference was made as to how I could no longer do this or that. **I suffered debilitating depression for many years.** Hearing all the things that I couldn't do brainwashed me into thinking that I was broken, useless and worthless. Which I now demonstrate clearly is not the case! In fact I often say "Thank God" for my Brain Injury or I could be an Accountant right now.

Fast forward past **many disastrous attempts at finding or keeping jobs.** These included a stint as a tour guide in a Historical Theatre in Bendigo. Can you imagine a person with a Brain Injury who has problems remembering new information in charge of a Tour Group? I would forget all the Historical facts and make up my own!

I was so desperate to work. When **I thought of making dog biscuits at home** I thought all my prayers had been answered!

I started making the biscuits, and with encouragement from the local Pet shop, we sold them at his store. I will never forget the feeling of him purchasing \$15 worth of HAPPY YAPPERS.

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I rocked up to his store with my pooch Riley, Mum's Tupperware container and my best china for them to sit on in his store, I was so proud. It made me smile on the inside in a way that I hadn't done for years!

Becoming a contributing member of society again has been one of the major reasons to my happiness today. Employment was so important to me; **it has given me back my self worth.**

**We now have been operating for the past 5 years.** Last November we started exporting HAPPY YAPPERS to HARROD's in London, our 6<sup>th</sup> shipment is on the way there now. We are about to go into Japan and Taiwan and of course we sell nationally.

**Working from home solves the problems I had in other jobs:**

- my fatigue/migraine problems, I can go to bed and rest if I am tired/unwell
- I can get up at 3.30am and start working
- I can work in a quiet environment on my own
- I can use the internet to research, the phone to call pet shops, and I don't have to leave the house!
- I don't feel the enormous pressure to offer employers a health consistency that I cannot even offer myself
- Anything that I have trouble with (ie numbers and the logistics side of the business) can be delegated and is
- The work environment can be modified to work around me!

HAPPY YAPPERS is a joyous, noisy celebration of my love for dogs and of who I am today because of my Brain Injury.

Having a short attention span is great for coming up with ideas... In fact I **can't stop coming up with ideas!** A Marketing Executive actually once called me a creative genius! Now that might be going a bit too far but it just goes to show that its all about perspective.

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The **biggest barriers** that I have faced with my particular disability **have been attitudes** about my disability and Acquired Brain Injury.

**People often tell me – “but you look alright”**. I say “does that mean that you would treat me differently if I was in a wheelchair”. These people are trying to be polite. But it’s just not good enough any more. It can get really tiring at times.

**Access to information** in a format that I could understand is **another barrier** that comes to mind.

When I was trying to export my biscuits to HARROD’s, I talked to a particular Federal Organization. The chap in charge asked me if I had told the people that I was dealing with that I was intellectually impaired. He then went on to say did I want to speak to a friend of his that was in a wheelchair and in business—nothing to do with export! This guy wasn’t a bad bloke, he just had no idea how to deal with a person with a Disability.

Another person asked me to do a 5 week full-time course on exporting, when I said that I had learning and reading difficulties and it would be a waste of my time. They then sent me 55 page document to read... go figure that one.

**I am very open about having a brain injury** and very up front about it. That is my choice. **I am proud of who I am** and, along with being a business person, a partner, a daughter etc, I happen to have a brain injury. My life is worth no more nor is it worth less because of my disability.

I want to help society as a whole **see the value in everyone with disabilities**. I do not want to be patronized. I do not want sympathy. I will continue to chase dreams and achieve my goals.  
I will not be defined or confined by my Disability.

Thank you, Milly Parker

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## **BLIND BUS DRIVER'S SYNDROME**

WHY do bosses balk at employing someone with an intellectual disability or who is deaf? Call it the "blind bus driver syndrome".

Susan Scott-Parker, founder and chief executive of the British-based Employers' Forum, said it was often not the disability that stopped people getting work.

It was the attitude of companies, and the problem often came down to a variation of a simple question: "Can you employ a blind bus driver?"

"Well, you can actually," Ms Scott-Parker said. "If she can do the job. The point isn't whether it's a woman, or a blind person. The point is whether the person can do the job.

"Most blind people don't apply to be bus drivers because most blind people know they can't drive the damn bus.

"But the question should be: can this person, if we're clever and make a few changes, do this job, and it's regardless of whether they are disabled or not."

She said that turning someone down for a job, or not promoting them, because they were disabled, was no different from discriminating against someone because of gender or race.

But most companies still believed it was not the same thing. Indeed, in Australia, according to disability employment network ACE, most complaints from disabled people to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission were related to employment.

Furthermore, companies still claimed that employing someone who was disabled would only create problems.

But in reality, Ms Scott-Parker said, the reasons why companies did not hire people with disabilities had nothing to do with a job applicant's condition — "The reason I don't hire is because I am uncomfortable being around weirdos. We call it the 'yuck factor'.

"Or 'I'm frightened'. Or 'I won't get it right' or 'I will say the wrong thing'."

The Employers' Forum, which began more than 20 years ago, is a not-for-profit employers' organisation focused on disability.

Its 400 members include ABN Amro, Asda Stores, Cable and Wireless, Deutsche Bank, Bank of England, Ernst & Young, Marks & Spencer, Pfizer, and Tesco. Core funders include Barclay's, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Lehman Brothers, Goldman Sachs, Sainsbury, GlaxoSmithKline and Cisco Systems.

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Ms Scott-Parker tells stories of how companies in effect disabled employees by refusing to help them get on with their jobs — for example, an accountant who developed multiple sclerosis and who lost her job because she could not use her keyboard. Two years later, someone pointed out to her that all she had to do was put the keyboard on her lap.

Employing disabled people was not an issue of social equity, she said. There was actually a strong business case.

First, only 17 per cent of people were born with disabilities. Most disabilities developed after the age of 16. From the age of 45, the trend accelerated. One-third of people aged 50-64 were disabled in one way or another. Some could not see a screen properly, others might have trouble hearing on the phone, and some had limited mobility with their hands.

"If you're good at making adjustments for your employees, you prevent people from becoming disabled and you minimise the numbers lost to early retirement," she said.

"If you're good at managing disability, you reduce health and safety costs. You have fewer accident costs, you have fewer lost working days, you have a lower incidence of work-related disability.

"You can reduce sickness absence if you have a healthy work environment. You also get more efficiency out of people."

## **THE HEALTH AND SAFETY CONUNDRUM**

After a decade as a full time carer, when my career passed away I was left in limbo, undecided whether to take advantage of another government benefit, return to work, or undertake some study.

Finances were tight so I began applying for jobs. After a decade out of the paid workforce, which had been a sinecure compared to my duties as a carer, my finances were badly in need of restoration. The trouble was, without a post-secondary qualification, and not having held a paid position for so long, potential employers did not consider me to be employable. So I decided to take up a second option – to return to study to obtain that much lauded paper qualification. Since I had just spent all that time gaining experience as a full-time carer, I enrolled in a certificate course to legitimise my knowledge of the subject. The institution accepted my application and I notified Centrelink.

I expected my financial situation to undergo a dramatic improvement, as attendance of the course would also qualify me for a training wage. This entitlement would put my budget into the black for the first time since becoming a carer.

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More than a decade of living in the red has all sorts of ramifications to self perception as well as health, nutrition, clothing and repairs around the house. There is only so much baked beans, oats, spaghetti and rice one can eat to fill a grumbling stomach and cheap fruit and vegetables are usually past their best. Choices in second hand clothing are limited. Repairs, unless urgent, don't get done and even the urgent ones will often only get a patch job, a *temporary fix-it* which holds *on a wing and a prayer*, until money comes in to do it properly, or it never happens. Of course Murphy's Law states that *if it can go wrong it will* and that *it never rains but it pours* so vital repairs just keep piling up in the *too-hard basket*. But this was finally going to change. Soon, I would get that miraculous bit of paper and a real, proper, paying job.

The day started out brilliantly. The sun shone warmly in a clear blue sky without a single cloud to mar that lovely point in time. Neatly, if casually, dressed, as befitting a mature age student, I hopped on the train with the details of how to get the training centre marked in the Melways, a supply of stationary items and lunch stashed in my most presentable bag. The wonderful sense of optimism infusing me lasted all the way to my destination.

The first dark cloud appeared in the form of a lack of an elevator to access the correct floor. Nothing daunted, I climbed several flights, one step after another, to reach the right area. Since I was the first to arrive, the receptionist admitted me to the classroom and I was seated to await the arrival of the others.

The other students straggled in one by one. Finally the course co-ordinator joined us to hand out instructions relating to the organization of the course. It all looked simple enough. The modules which were to be covered posed no obvious problems and I had already had a thorough grounding in most of the practical aspects.

At the end of the introductory session I was confident of walking away with that precious piece of paper, which was of such vital importance in attracting an employer. I was looking forward to re-entry into the workforce and ameliorating my bleak financial situation. I smiled my goodbyes to the other class members and reached under the table for my crutches.

"Wait a minute," the co-ordinator stopped me, "I need a quick word with you."

I sat down again.

"I'm sorry," the coordinator continued, "but I can't let you do this course."

I was stunned – "Why?"

"You're on crutches. If we had known earlier, you would not have been accepted in the first place."

"What difference does that make?"

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“If there is an emergency, you won’t be able to run.”

“But, I’ve had lots of practice and I’m pretty fast on them. I would be able to manage. I don’t expect to be on them for long. It’s only temporary.”

Then came the punch line.

“I won’t beat around the bush – the fact is – you are an occupational Health and Safety risk.”

This was the first time I had actually been told that the reason I was not being considered was because I was considered to be a Health and Safety risk – something which was subsequently reinforced by other people over the years. I was never allowed the opportunity to even attempt that qualification. The crux of the matter being that I was no longer considered a normal human being with rights – as a person on crutches – I was now perceived as a HEALTH & SAFETY ISSUE.

*(Identifying details have been omitted from this testimony to protect both the innocent and the guilty.)*

## **BROMHAM PLACE CLUBHOUSE**

People with mental health issues often have great difficulty gaining or retaining employment after experiencing a psychotic episode, suffering bouts of severe depression, or deterioration in their mental health. People can also have trouble holding down employment while undertaking any subsequent treatment.

Employers or prospective employers generally have little knowledge or understanding about mental illness, and understandably may put employing people with mental illness in the too hard basket.

However there are ways to achieve good outcomes for people with mental illness in the work place, and at the same time take out the perceived management difficulties from the employer’s perspective.

Bronwyn place is a community service agency that provides support and case management for people with a mental illness.

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What an organization does is provide a certain number of EFT (effective full time) hours to Bronwyn place for one or more administrative or other positions, which provides certain outcomes for that organization. Bronwyn Place then manages the workers on a day-to-day basis, which enables individuals to cope with their mental rehabilitation without the stress involved, which may occur by working directly with that employer. This may be because of having to take time off at certain parts of mental down times. This agency oversees the project to its completion, or that the tasks are completed by daily or weekly time lines. It is a great partnership as it allows the employer to receive a worthwhile product while the people with mental illness gain confidence and skills within a supportive and understanding environment.

( Bromham Place, PO Box 703. Richmond VIC 3121. Phone (03) 9427 7377.)

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