

Disability Done Different: Episode 29

Kurt Fearnley on...being Kurt Fearnley

Podcast transcript

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Hosts: Roland & Evie Naufal

Guest: Kurt Fearnley

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Evie Naufal

Hello, and welcome to Disability Done Different Candid Conversations, we're so in-sync now. My name is Evie Naufal and I'm in the studio with my dad Roland, and we are joined by a very, very special guest today Mr Kurt Fearnley. The man who needs no introduction, but just in case, he's a three-time Paralympic Gold Medallist, a founding member of the Independent Advisory Council for the NDIS and more recently a broadcaster. He was the host of ABC TV's One Plus One this year, and also a podcast, one of our fellow podcasters in arms, Kurt has his own podcast called Kurt Fearnley's Tiny Island. And more recently, he's the host of 'A Nation Changed' a four-part podcast that explores the evolution of the NDIS, which we're going to talk a little bit about today. Welcome Kurt.

Kurt Fearnley

Hi there guys.

Roland Naufal

And you've got your own podcast haven't you?

Roland Naufal

Yeah, I do, yeah. So it's three years since I finished racing, I went straight out and started just talking to people about what it is to be an Australian, so I'm about 80 episodes in I think.

Roland Naufal

So Kurt when you, 'What it means to be an Australian', do you get beyond the cliches of mateship and looking after each other, is there more depth to it than that?

Kurt Fearnley

Looks there's both. There are people who don't think about 'What it is to be an Australian', beyond the, you know, beyond the way that we've come to terms as it be a cliché like 'mateship' and 'looking after each other'. There are those people that that's a solemn belief that that is what it is to be an Australian. But a lot of people I spoke to, Teela Reid who spoke about that she's an indigenous solicitor and grew up a couple of hours away from me and spoke about how she doesn't believe herself to be an Australian. Everything that we take for granted about what it is to be an Australian it felt like there was always a contrast to how she would feel it and other people would speak about how exactly that, that these cliché approach to what it is to be Australian is echoed in another 150 countries around the world that there are. Then you keep talking about what it is, the industry they're in, how it's reflected when they travel, how the music industry is seen differently when it leaves the shores or how we deal with whether it be differences in how we accept new immigrants, you know. You do get some varied responses, right from the cliché to the Australian doesn't represent, what it is to be an Australian doesn't represent in how I experience my life at all. So yeah.

Roland Naufal

COVID's reshaped a lot of our opinions of ourselves hasn't it Kurt. If you've been looking at it for three years, COVID really makes a difference doesn't it? Do you want me to expand a bit on that? I grew up on American TV and I always thought I was as much American as I was Australian until COVID broke out and it's like, holy shit, I'm not American, I'm not, I'm very different to those people.

Kurt Fearnley

Well, I would say I've never had to, so everyone that I've had on eventually do find a degree of uniqueness in some way. But I spent every, three months a year since I was 13 years old in the US and there is no place more different in the world, although there are some of those superficial kind of differences, or similarities, there's a chasm between how we experience life and how the US experience life it's, yeah. But there are some people that have responded differently because of how we went into lockdown and they would have sat there and sworn to you that the egalitarian nature of Australia was the thing that they really believed that we would look after each other. But looking at the empty shelves of toilet paper, watching whether it be a protest or how people treat each other in that kind of scenario, that's the thing that I think through the way that we see each other, that hostility. Because up until then there is a lot of, we look after each other, we treat each other well, we, you know, but yeah, that's how I think it's probably changed. We've had a couple of people mention about, I just didn't think we were that.

Roland Naufal

That's interesting. Kurt part of what we want to talk to you about is 'A Nation Changed' podcast that you've just completed and is out there on the airwaves. One of the key questions you're addressing in that is, is the NDIS living up to its principles? Can I ask you, when I've seen your interviews about the NDIS you say it was never going to solve all our problems. It's a scheme, it's got certain things it's going to offer, but it's not going to solve all our problems, but given you're talking about 'A Nation Changed', is it changed enough with what the NDIS has done?

Kurt Fearnley

Yeah, I feel like that's almost like a conversation about how long is a piece of string, I do think it has changed the way that people with disabilities are able to, 400,000 people with disabilities and from last time I checked, it was in the 80 plus percentage of people who participated in the scheme had a better experience of the services of how they engage than what they did previously, which is amazing. So if it's even 80%, then that is 320,000 Australians whose life is better, who feel like they're able to engage further into the community. So if you're trying to say that, is that enough? I would love that every single person who engages with the scheme has an amazing experience, who feel like they're,

the people who assess them understand what, who they are, what their alternate ways of engaging with the world is and give them a fair hearing and a positive change to their life. I wish that was all 400,000, and I wish there were more people who were able to actually enter into the scheme. But you do look back and you think over half a dozen years, 340,000 people, 400,000 people have entered the scheme, a big chunk of that whose lives are now better, whose families are now able to engage with the country better, I can't say anything other than we have changed, we have changed Australia.

Roland Naufal

One of our, we're big fans of the scheme in a lot of ways too Kurt, but one of our biggest disappointments with it is we hope the insurance approach would lead to a greater emphasis on inclusion that ultimately it's better for everybody, including the society if we include people in mainstream services. And to date the NDIS is still very much a service-based system where people are, there's not enough work being put into creating this inclusive society. I know you're huge on having a more inclusive society. Do you have any comments around that aspect of it?

Kurt Fearnley

I think that if we fund this NDIS to its absolute potential, if the Australian community don't come on board, if we don't get communities employing people with disabilities, if we don't get your local community clubs, whether that be sporting or the arts to actually engage with the individuals and participating in the NDIS, then we've funded it for nothing. Without community to come along, we've put \$22 billion into a pot of money. We've put \$22 billion who people with disabilities get to find themselves, who get to potentially go further out than what they once were, but we need welcoming arms to actually really fulfil what the NDIS is about.

So 100%, we need to, we need to now continue to build community to allow everybody, and that means the father of non-disabled kids. I need to be looking at the sporting clubs that my kids go to and make sure that every kid gets to experience it. We need to be, each and every one of us should be looking around at the workplace that we're in right now and look around and see is there disability represented in it, and if not, why? And when we get more employers, when we get more places that are asking that question, then that's, well that's just the next battle, that's where we've got to head.

Roland Naufal

We wanted to explore the concept of community with you in a few different ways and one of the things that strikes me about you Kurt, and I revisited a lot of your interviews and doing the research, for you is that you belong to a host of communities. One of the communities is The Fearnleys, you're a bloody big family with some notable people in it. You come from a small rural community and you describe the disability sector as my community. And I wanted to ask you, it seems like a tough question, and Evie wasn't sure I should ask you, but why do you call the disability 'My Community', the disability sector my community?

Kurt Fearnley

I would say that my family brought me up in Carcoar my family was an extended family of half of the citizens in Carcoar. They gave me a base where I was able to feel like I was valued by each and every person in that town. They raised \$10,000 for me when I was 13 years old and they gave me the opportunity to race wheelchairs. We weren't financial enough to head that way and they told my parents when they objected to that to stay out of it and said it's between us and the boy. So well, that entire community changed my world and gave me an access into what I now refer to as my family as this great big, giant connection of people with disabilities around this country. It was first represented through the Paralympic Family, where people with disabilities would develop me, would kind of add to my experience within the sport.

They would develop an athlete that was then able to go around the world and find the life that I get to live in now, and the reason why they are my family is because I have the privilege of representing my community, the Australian community on that stage, but nobody loves Paralympic sport more than kids with disabilities and their families. They would come out and they would be at every single place that we would go to, whether it was, you know, you'd go to an event domestically and compete, there would be kids with disabilities coming out and engaging with that sport. And you just feel that there is, it's not a distant kind of relationship, you are not an athlete and they're a fan. The amount of support that you receive from that family right there is nothing short of the love that you receive from the people within your community. They engage and they follow and they try and give the same opportunity to their kids they're introducing to you, that Carcoar gave to me. And I don't know, I'd received support throughout my entire life and I just feel that support when you're in the community of people with disabilities is nothing short of anything else that I've experienced.

Roland Naufal

It's just awesome mate. I've got to admit I'm a fan Kurt of the way you speak and the things you talk about, and I wanted to ask you about one thing you said, which is the pity that some people give you and the stigma that still exists in Australian society around disability. And you've just described being like a significant hero to a lot of people, and let's take that as read, it's true, you are a significant hero to a lot of people yet you can also be a subject of pity. And Evie and I were talking about cognitive dissonance before Christmas, trying to come up with a definition of it, I reckon that must be pretty close mustn't it?

Kurt Fearnley

I think probably. Yeah, they are within meters of each other, there are very different experiences. They are just light-years apart. So yeah and it's not just me that experiences that, it's, you know, it's my kids as well. They experience these two different worlds where dad would be praised while we're walking down the street and then dad will be either treated like, you know, an objective of pity as a person. When it comes to things like airlines or it comes to trying to catch a Cab, or turns up a building that's inaccessible then I'm less than, so they get to experience it with me, and I don't know, there is something both motivating that, you know, obviously we've just got to keep walking, we've got to keep talking about this stuff, and then also pretty humbling.

Roland Naufal

I wonder if it stops you from getting arrogant Kurt. I wonder if just as you're talking, I wonder if it's one of those keys to why you're so fucking likable is because you keep getting shot down. You don't get the opportunity to build that elite sportsman arrogance without being shot down every now and then?

Kurt Fearnley

Oh yeah, yeah. You know what I could do with, I don't know, if you think that maybe there is something good about it but it's tiring Roland, it's tiring, you know, like it'd be great to be able to not have to have, and it's not frequent. Like it's not every day that you go down there that if something happens that shocks you out of the life that you're in, it's not but when it does it, it's just I don't know, it's great to think that there might be good come from it, because other than that, it's just plain old bloody exhausting.

Roland Naufal

Yeah, fair enough.

Evie Naufal

Kurt, the fear of failure is what drives a lot of successful people. What gets you out of bed?

Kurt Fearnley

Not the fear of failure. I try not to even contemplate that as a real thing. I would kind of rally against any sort of fear, you know what I mean? Like there were times where I didn't like heights, so I've got to try and track down an airline, a company that would allow me to jump out of a plane. You know, like I'm still a bit afraid of heights, I'm not a big fan of it at all, but the idea of being motivated by fear, I want to make sure that I am able to be a part of, I think it's more this idea that I'm able to be a part of something bigger and that I'm able to contribute in whatever way it is. Whatever's in front of me right now, I'm able to participate in some form of adventure and, you know, I've always known that there's been a greater purpose, that very big idea that you're creating change. But if you were able to do these things that the guys that led the path before you, they created the change so I could be me. I get to lay down a new path so the next person can be bigger and better and experience amazing things past that. But the fear of failure, that's something that I would kind of push to the side because, I don't know, running, entertaining this idea I just, I don't see how good comes from it.

Evie Naufal

Yeah. That's totally consistent with I think a lot of things you've done in your life, including crawling the Kokoda Track.

Roland Naufal

And one of the things you said Evie about you can't really call what you do a crawl Kurt, what were you going to say?

Evie Naufal

It was almost like doing pushups all the way along the Kokoda Track?

Kurt Fearnley

Oh you know, I would recommend anyone doing the Kokoda Track, anyone in this country. It gives you this perspective and idea about what it is to be an Australian or at least it challenges what your previous ideas were, that there was a real cost that was paid, but I wouldn't recommend anyone crawling it. That was just brutal. And you know what, there was probably in the middle of that, I was probably motivated by a bit of fear. I do remember that there were some nights, six months before I would trek it, I would wake up in the middle of the night terrified that this is going to be 96 kilometres and you're in the middle of this dense jungle, in a place that you've never been before. And so then you do wake up and it's like, okay, well that's on my mind, how do I rectify it, how do I get rid of that and how do I try and make sure that I can sleep better tomorrow. And you just had to work more and you just had to crawl more or you're looking for greater efficiencies about how you crawl. But that was probably the riskiest thing that I ever did, but also just an incredible experience, just an amazing adventure that I got to share with the people that mean the most to me in the world with of lots of my family.

Evie Naufal

Yeah and watching some of the video footage of the crawl I loved hearing your reflections about, I mean, I don't know that I heard you use the word 'I' at all in the video, it was constantly about 'We' and about the people who were there with you. And you talked a little bit about needing to ask for help and to put the ego aside. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Roland Naufal

Can we contrast that too Kurt with other times you talk about eating pain, and you've eaten a lot of pain in your life as a way to success in competitive sports. So you know how to eat pain, but your question Evie?

Evie Naufal

Well, you also clearly know how to ask for help and to do things with people?

Kurt Fearnley

Yeah. I've been asked this a couple of times, how do they work in with each other, and the only way that I can do one is with the other. Knowing that I've always had this group around me where it was kind of just bombarded in me that, one, life is going to be uncomfortable, but you're strong enough to get through it, but there will always be people around you that you are able to rely on them and vice versa that I play a role with that group as well. So they have been some of the most painful days in the past, whether they be sport or just the monotony of trying to be at the top of the game for a couple of decades. But I've never, although I've eaten the pain alone, I've never got there on my own, and I've never felt like I'm on my mind.

I've always, I've always, and this is one of the strange things as well, is that not only do I feel that, I often feel guilt about the way that I got to experience my disability with so. I don't know whether it's unique, but it was just perfect for the way that I would engage with it, that my disability was there, it was obvious, and I was a focal point, that my community saw it, they didn't ostracize, they did the exact opposite of that. They made sure that I was given everything, every skill required to engage with my community and that includes feeling no hesitation, feeling no shame in looking up and asking for help to the people around. And so they, both of those have linked with each other and have added to the other one.

In training days there was no hesitation of being open and honest with my coach and the people around me that I was training with. I couldn't have made those games if I didn't have that skill. I don't have the skills to build strength 100% on my own, I just, I don't. There is no way that if I was in a vacuum I would experience the life that I have. So yeah, although it might seem like almost a contradiction to others, I don't see how they live on their own.

Roland Naufal

Kurt when you talk about Kakoda there was a hanging question or a hanging statement that you made that I'm really keen to follow up. You said that your day would end, I think you said at three o'clock, 3:30 in the afternoon and the people you were walking with would strip you down and wash you and then the rest of that day was the hardest part of the crawl for you. Did I get that right?

Kurt Fearnley

Oh mate it was, so you just went through 8 or 9 hours of being in discomfort but you've had this immediate requirement in front of you, you've got to take another step, you've got to take another step, you've got to take another step, you've got to go down a hill, you've got to cross it yourself. You know like there's, there's the immediate need to answer this question or this problem that's in front of you but the moment that that stops meant that you had to sit there and control every other thought that was, every other thought, every other doubt that was in the back of your head, you know. You're two days in, two days in, and you're feeling broken, you know, like, and you realise that you've got eight, nine more days in front of you where you're looking into and have experienced the jungle, the likes of which you'd never seen before in your life.

So you're lying in bed at three o'clock at night, you've just had everything rebandage, you know, they would go through every single cut and graze and use like a Dettol on it. And they would then re-cover it to make sure that, you know, that it was safe to crawl again the next day. But you're lying in there feeling every bit of the pain that you'd earned that day, and then doubting and wandering, and trying to get your head around where that one day fit in the entire journey. Those moments there you'd just lay there and you'd kind of say on repeat that if I sleep my body would heal, if it heals I'll feel a little bit

better and I only need to feel a little bit better to try again tomorrow. And it was funny Mac would come up to me, who was my Porter. He was a local guy and he was my Porter from day two. He was also the guy that would strip me off at the end and make my tent. And every day he would sit next to me at night at about sunset and he'd just whisper and he'd say, if you want to, if you want out of here just tell me and I'll have you in Moresby by morning. If you want out of here, I'll put you on my shoulders and you'll be in bed, you'll be in bed by tomorrow. And it was, yeah mate, it was just where you had to manage all of the personal expectations, and the reality of the discomfort that you're going through, you had to manage everything because there was nothing that needed to be answered that was immediately in front of you.

Roland Naufal

This could be a strange question, we may well cut it out afterwards Kurt, but I've just listened to a podcast with a guy that's a paraplegic that teaches yoga. I don't know if you've heard of, but he talks about addressing pain in a different way and the spaces between pain and understanding rather than resisting pain, going with pain. I question and it sounds weird is do you miss the pain of pushing yourself so hard?

Kurt Fearnley

No. No, I couldn't get the, for me when you were in the middle of that, it was always for a purpose, right so you were always trying to get to the other side or develop the strength, the only way you develop strength is dealing with discomfort, so that means putting your body in a place where it's uncomfortable and you're feeling pain and learning to manage it. Some people do talk about finding a bit of joy in it, I would find the joy in the overall picture and just know that I had to manage that pain and discomfort to get to that moment. But I will never put myself in that situation of Kokoda again. I do enjoy testing my body, I do enjoy, you know, jumping onto the handcycle and knocking out a hundred kilometres and feeling that, you know, that discomfort I love. I love crawling with my kids for a bushwalk where we get to have that little adventure that is uncomfortable, but it is, you know, it gives you those really, really beautiful experiences with, you know, with your people, with your community.

So but no, I don't miss that. I don't miss the training. I miss my friends of sport, but I do miss being amazing at that one particular thing where, you know, when you're at the top of your game, you get in this, your racing chair and you just feel like you are perfect where everything is like it's a machine headed in that one direction, and that feeling is pretty incredible. It's the reason why people give such long periods of their life for really what is a fleeting moment, a Paralympics or an Olympic Games.

Evie Naufal

And you have had a stellar career. I mean, four Olympic Games, including three gold medals, four wins at the New York City Marathon. I won't tell you your whole career, but for our listeners, suffice to say, it's pretty stellar. And you've retired from wheelchair racing and marathons you mentioned I think in 2018. Where are you going to get your adrenaline now?

Kurt Fearnley

Honestly, I would say that the perfect day for me is just finding something to do with my kids and, you know, like we've got a little place just outside of Newcastle. And if we're able to go there and just have an adventure for the day that's enough of a fix for me, that different stage of life and different stage of where you find that enjoyment, where you find that need to exist in that kind of space.

Roland Naufal

Kurt we're starting 2021 and a lot of people are looking forward and thinking about some really big picture issues, you know, we've gone through a year of COVID and what's life going to be like. We've talked to a lot of people on Candid Conversations about the concept of trust, trust in relationships,

trust in the people around us, and you've spoken to us already, and when I've seen you speak, you speak so much about collaboration. You speak about the people who worked with you on Kokoda, about the other Paralympians that guided you, has trust been an important concept in all of it?

Kurt Fearnley

I feel when we were in the middle of COVID, when everything, in the beginning of it, when it was, you know, you jump onto social media and it was, everything was falling apart, you know, I felt like my world was going to stand because I do have trust in the communities that I live in, I do know all of my neighbours, I do touch base with them. I do communicate with them, everyone that I work with I've had relationships with them for decades. I've been able to exist in places and I wouldn't exist in places where trust was an issue, but I know that huge parts of our population don't get that ability. They don't have the luxury to only work in environments where they trust, where the work is, what the work is doing, where they trust the people who are either there in their direct, who are in their direct employers, they or the other direction. And the thought that they, that's where my biggest fear was that you could tell there was a lot of people who don't have that luxury of trusting where, and who they lived with, of trusting where they get their employment from, of trusting, you know, that they are going to be safe. And that's honestly, I did worry and part of me does still worry that there will be a big part of our community that will lose faith and lose trust with everyone else. And when that happens, I think that we will have some, we will have some pretty big problems to deal with.

So you're seeing the lack of trust in science, the lack of trust in governments, the lack of trust in, well the lack of trust in something like the NDIS. I see one of the biggest risks of a successful NDIS is community lose trust in it, they lose the faith that it's actually doing what it's meant to be doing. And that's one of the reasons why I kind of got really excited about doing 'A Nation Changed' so that we could talk honestly about it, that we could have those conversations that are uncomfortable to have, that we could talk about where it came from, where it's at. But not just talk about the glowy bits, talk about the issues, the fact that it is exhausting for many people to engage with it on that first run. You know there is, I feel that that idea of trust, although I recognise that I feel like that I'm incredibly fortunate that that hasn't wavered in my life, the trust in community, I do recognise that that's a big risk for lots of parts of our community going forward.

Roland Naufal

A moment ago Kurt, you spoke about no longer being at the elite level and missing that. I'm going to sound like a bit of a fanboy, but I think you are still at the elite level. You're absolutely an elite thinker in this space. You're an elite leader, you're a hero, that's such a corny word and I don't use it but, I really don't use it, it's unusual for me to come across like this Kurt. But you're someone who's really, really elite at this level and I wanted to, that's a trap question because if you agree with it you sound like a Dick. But what I wanted to ask you about is gratitude because you talk about gratitude and it's a big concept for us too, but what do you mean when you talk about gratitude?

Kurt Fearnley

I don't see myself, and could never see myself in there. So I would say that the reason why I speak about disability is that it's a fine line between gratitude and guilt that I spoke about earlier on. This just absolute gratitude that I recommend, like I realised that I get to live my life right now because people stood up and fought for me before I was able to fight for myself. That is the only reason that I've ended up where I've ended up.

Roland Naufal

That may be true Kurt, but how do you remind yourself of it. That may well be true, but a lot of people stand on the shoulders of others, but don't remember it. You remember it.

Kurt Fearnley

Yeah mate. If you grow up crawling around the hills and not knowing that there's anything outside of the grass that's in front of you, you know, I literally grew up in Carcoar where my world was fingers in the dirt, you know, that was it. I have experienced that a hundredfold over in countries around the world where I land in a place and that's another kid who's still there, you know, he or she is still living in the dirt. They're still riding on the back of their mum as a 10, 11, 12, 13 year old. So there is no way to escape the absolute idea, the truth about who I am, like there's no way. I am here, I get to do what I do because people fought for me. And so I would say that experiencing that abroad, spending time in developing countries where the idea of being a person with a disability is extremely different to the way that I get to live right now, but knowing that that was my existence, you know like that was me, I was their kid, that was, you know, that was and could have been my reality. So I don't see how you live that way, how you see those things and you do not connect them. You'd be neglecting your duties of being any sort of decent human if you didn't.

So yes and I just, I don't think that there's any sort of alternative to that, that there's a contrast, it's the contrast of how I live right now and how I grew up is, that too much ground has been covered to not look at that and be thankful. And then to experience the very real reality where two-thirds of the world who require a wheelchair will never see one, to land in those places and to experience it with them today, there's no alternative. Like there's just, if you experience that and you don't learn and you don't find that moment of gratitude, if you don't, I don't know, if I didn't take that on board, I think I would have some much greater issues in me.

Roland Naufal

So the third and final of my new year's concepts that I wanted to talk to you about that I've heard you talk about a lot Kurt is resilience, and you've got a seven-year-old son and two or three-year-old daughter, have I got that right?

Kurt Fearnley

You do, I do yeah.

Roland Naufal

How are you going to promote resilience in those two?

Kurt Fearnley

We always talk about how strong they are, we always talk about how much we value who they are. We always try and mix, you know, like my wife hates sports, she's not a big fan of it. She loves wheelchair racing. She loved wheelchair racing for a period of time, but we do, you know, we do take our kids on adventures and have from the moment they've been able to walk, and we do talk about every time they've fallen over about that little fall's going to make you be able to get up quicker next time. We talk about, you know, we talk about how you know those moments when they do crash their bike or lose in sport, how they're the lessons that are going to make you, the same conversation that I was having around disability that made me, we're having with our kids and have done since the first 60 seconds that they were in our arms. I don't know whether it's going to work, it worked for me. But we're doing, we're kind of doing what we can in that area.

My young fellow just the other day, I don't know what it was, but he came back and he's crying, he had like a graze across his knee and he says, it's hurting, he's given me a hug and a cuddle and he says to me, but I know it's going to make me stronger. I might be creating a little [inaudible 00:37:11] but he's, you know, those things, those lessons, those conversations, they are definitely sinking in.

Evie Naufal

What a sweetheart.

Kurt Fearnley

You know what, he is a sweetheart. He just, this is, so this just happened, over Christmas I had a little kid come up to me repetitively and he was only a couple of years older than Harry and he would say that I got little legs. You've got little legs, you've got little legs, this little kid, and I'm like, okay I tried to talk to him about what it is. And it's just like, it turned into, you've got little legs and a laugh and walk off. And I said, mate, you know that you're being a bit rude aren't you, to this kid and he's gone yep. And I said, it's pretty mean what you saying? And he goes, yep and Harry comes up to me after and he goes, dad, what was that little, what was he saying, you know, was he being naughty? And I said, yes mate he was. Because he said that you had little legs, Harry asked me and I said yeah. Mate it was more about what he said. And Harry says, have I ever said that to you? I said mate it wouldn't matter if he did, because we would have talked it through. And then he goes, what did he say, have you ever wished that I had the little legs he asked me, I said, no, you're perfect. And Harry goes, dad you're perfect as well, I wouldn't swap you for anything.

This is a little kid who at six years old is processing his peers mocking his dad and then had the awareness to think, have I done that? Yeah, it's funny around disability, the lessons that every single person are able to contemplate from, you know, the kid in the classroom, with the kid with autism and Asperger's to the son of a guy in a wheelchair. There are lessons there that I just think are good for the future of community. And I felt pretty grateful that he had learnt this lesson of reflection and assessment. And he's a sweet, sweet little kid.

Evie Naufal

I loved his appearance too in the podcast 'A Nation Changed' that you've got him, and both kids at the beginning of one of the episodes talking to them about what they think of disability.

Roland Naufal

And would they give their pocket money?

Evie Naufal

Yeah, that was really sweet.

Kurt Fearnley

We did have that conversation, and we were trying to talk about how the NDIS funds people in community, and it funds them to be able to get into the school, feeling more able, they're able to interact more or it's able to get them into the workforce, and the only thing he took away was the NDIS is going to help people to have jobs.

Evie Naufal

Yeah. But to be fair, that is about the level that most people seem to have when we talk about NDIS.

Kurt Fearnley

Yeah. Well, it's easy. It's easy to remember, but yeah, he did say that, yes, he'd give his pocket money to allow people with disabilities to be able to interact with schools and stuff. Later on he did come up to me and ask do I have to give all of my pocket money?

Evie Naufal

Once those cameras stopped rolling.

Kurt Fearnley

Yeah. He's like do you mean all of it?

Evie Naufal

Kurt, there's a question I want to ask you that I haven't been able to figure out how to word. So if you don't want to answer this just say so. I really enjoyed the podcast. I listened to it with my partner who's just about to start a job with Hireup actually, totally coincidentally in a few weeks and she's coming from outside of the sector, so it was really fun for the two of us to be able to listen together and for her to have that introduction to the sector, so thanks for that. One of the things I noticed that I keep thinking about since listening to the podcast, it's very well produced by the way, and it's obviously done by podcast professionals because it's got this real story arc to it. It sets up the story and then it's got the big challenge and the victory at the end, and there's kind of some people who are cast as the heroes and the antagonists as well, cast is a bit strong, but it's really got that kind of colour to it, which was really enjoyable to listen to. But one of the things that struck me in listening to it is that when I say there were some people who kind of reoccurred in the podcast as more antagonistic characters, some of them were the most senior leaders of the NDIS today and I don't really know what my question is. Maybe I'll soften it a little bit and just say, that's my interpretation of the podcast and that's something that stuck with me from listening to it.

Roland Naufal

It's a very roundabout way to say that one or two other people really pissed you off with their answers?

Evie Naufal

Yeah. Yeah.

Roland Naufal

Did they piss you off too Kurt?

Kurt Fearnley

There were, there were some uncomfortable conversations in there, but like I said, the podcast was meant to be challenging, and I do have to thank Hireup for investing in this and telling a story that I think isn't told enough and given us this honest with this ability to be honest in there and take risks in there. And when I finished the podcast, I don't think they're a villain, you know what I mean, there's not villains in there, and there are kind of robust conversations that I think that we get people to voice that response to that as well.

So I know a few of the comments I'm sure that I can imagine that people with disabilities have wrote to me and questioned what were you thinking, you know, why didn't you respond there? But five minutes later in that same episode, Jordan Steele-John who is, he is a warrior for disability he responds to everything and a podcast isn't really about tying things up either. It's not about having answers to every comment or, you know, creating the I don't know, like a fully formed movie. I would hope that some people finish the podcast and go I love that bit, that would be shit, might need to put a bit of time into it. Why do I think that is a bit shit and what can we do to rectify that? Do we need to alter approaches? Do we need to educate people that were in it? Do we need people who were in there to listen more or engage more? You know, like I hope that the podcast is not something that we pat ourselves on the back with and say, gee how great was the community to get the NDIS up 8 years ago, I hope it's a bit of everything. I hope that was an incredible thing that happened in those years in the lead up to the NDIS.

It's come a long way over six years, but shit, it needs a lot of work and it needs potentially work from all different elements of it, so that was what my hope would be.

Roland Naufal

It's an important part of history. I imagine that anybody teaching in the disability sector would really tell you that podcast is an important bit of history and I sometimes wonder about podcasts too. And Harry's great, great, great-grandchildren may find this audio stream of their great, great, great, great grandad, Kurt Fearnley and listen to a podcast where you've been talking and connect with you, and I want to try to connect a couple of dots that I've heard you put out there during this podcast Kurt. The podcast you do, your personal podcast, which is 'What does it take to be an Australian', and then your answer to the characteristics of the Carcoar community, can you do the characteristics of the Carcoar community about what it takes to be a great Australian?

Kurt Fearnley

Hmm. So the podcast is, it's called 'Tiny Island' and it is, that's the content that we cover, Carcoar, the traits that that entire community, it was egalitarian and it's that, it was allowing every person from within the community to engage with community, and they bore the cost of that. So it wasn't you know an idea in the wind, it wasn't just you know, at the risk of saying a line that I detested, it wasn't just this idea of virtue signalling. It wasn't something that they say that are unwilling to actually live by, they lived by it, and farmers and fencers and you know your roustabouts and shearers they would put their hand into their pocket and give so that a person with the disability was able to be who they believed they could be, that is what I see to be a big part about what it is to be an Australia. It's the egalitarian nature that we speak about, sometimes we don't actually I guess talk about it in its accurate form. It's not just words, its action.

Roland Naufal

Sensational Kurt, we're going to finish up. I didn't really want to ask this question, but I'll ask it and Maia can edit out the intro if we end up using it, because I don't think it quite works, but people obviously love you Kurt, but does anybody say, fuck you Kurt Fearnley?

Kurt Fearnley

Plenty of people.

Roland Naufal

Other than competitors and immediate family. Let's cut them out.

Kurt Fearnley

Look I get emails from people that, you know, like they don't like, and you know, not just from external, I get emails from people within the community as well, who don't like what I do or don't like how I do it, and that's completely fine. Every time I do get the odd email that says I should have been aborted say, I guess that's the old response that would come whenever it was talking about things like funding and NDIS, so that you're funding a system that looks after the needs and increases the engagement of people with disability. When I talk about that, people will send me a message. Why should I fund you because your parents weren't responsible enough to be aborted. That's how dark it gets, that's the darkest of the dark. I don't know whether that, I like to think that that's somebody who is trying to think up the worst possible answer to send to another human and sending it and laughing as they walked away. I don't hope that that is an ideology that people actually buy into.

I do read, I don't just block those that abuse me. I read and I acknowledge because my family that we spoke about earlier on, if I am getting these things, then another kid with a disability is getting something similar. And when I interact with that kid he needs to know that I'm receiving it as well, and we do get darker email and our non-disabled peers like that you turn up in a combined team of athletes, and you sit around and you say, do you get hate mail? And they're like no. I get hate mail.

Another person with a disability who speaks about this is, they get hate mail. You know there are certain things that you need to see and look into and acknowledge. Move on, don't let it affect your day to day life, don't let it affect the person that you need to be, or that you are, or that you would like to become, but you look at it because you realise that you're not operating in a vacuum.

There's a lot of people out there living the same experiences that you are, and you need to know and they need to know that you are experiencing that, that moment, that rubbish that they are too. And that's why I talk about family, because, you know, that's, you want to be able to share the same experiences they are so that you are able to help your family, my family get through it when they're there.

Roland Naufal

It prompts me to ask one more question that I wasn't going to ask Kurt because that answer really surprised me. I didn't expect you to come out of a dark place in response to that because you are so well-loved. But Evie and I often talk about, we work in the disability sector. We talk about the disability sector, we're father and daughter and my wife Vanessa is a co-director, so our world is disability and it gets to be a bit of a bubble. And I saw you being interviewed, I think it was by Ellen Fanning. It was one of the progressive lefty people who are like journalists on the ABC and she was blown away by the social model of disability. Like this is a really inclusive, wonderful, big deal also that it seemed to be fairly new to her. And this is like 25, 30 years that model's been around. We do live in a bit of a bubble sometimes, but it just doesn't sound like you get to do you?

Kurt Fearnley

Oh, the social model, it does challenge people and I do my absolute best not to live in a bubble. I do my absolute best. If somebody disagrees with me on social media I don't block them, I follow them. I give them the opportunity so that I can see another part of their world, so that I can potentially hopefully validate that person and see that person and find a bit of hope there, so I do my absolute best not to live in a bubble. Although there are some parts that you just can't escape that you know, when you are living in this world around disability, you do learn or you do hold those things like the social model around disability. You hold it so close that you forget that even some of the best educated minds in Australia have never heard of it.

So I try not to live in a bubble. I try and make sure that we bring people with us because we can't just have the most educated, progressive, you know, group of a hundred people with disabilities within Australia that just can't, we need community to come along as well. We need to make sure that the stories that we're telling and that the realities of the lives of people with disability is filtering through to every person with a disability or as many as we can. But yeah, there are some parts of it where you just can't help but end up to get that these things that are so obvious to you, you know once you could have them hit the world of, you could have them hit parts of the community that you're in, then yeah, it's not common knowledge, no matter how much you wish it was.

Roland Naufal

I just want to finish and say, thank you Kurt Fearnley. I don't have a lot of people that I hold up there as a modern day, I don't want to use the word 'hero', but I will, you're pretty freaking impressive and we really thank you for giving us the time today. I want to put in a poke for Hireup for having the smarts to put in the work and the sponsorship to get 'A Nation Changed' podcast up. So people should Google 'A Nation Changed' Kurt Fearnley, they'll find the Hireup podcast and also direct them and myself towards 'A Tiny Island'.

Kurt Fearnley

Well, absolutely and the podcast community is incredibly lovely. Like we were seeing they engage in a way that I don't think you can in other mediums, these longer-form conversations. I do feel really

grateful that Hireup gave me that opportunity to create, to help in creating that 'A Nation Changed' podcast. It's something completely different to what I've ever done before and I haven't seen that done in the disability sector, these high quality, highly produced storytelling. And hopefully, hopefully your listeners are able to jump online and check it out and then of course, rate it up high, wherever you get your podcast from.

Evie Naufal

He's a professional people. Thank you so much, Kurt. It was lovely to meet you and so great to have this chat.

Kurt Fearnley

Thank you guys.

Evie Naufal

You've been listening to Disability Done Different, a candid conversation with dad's hero Kurt Fearnley.

Roland Naufal

Do you think I came across this as a bit too much of a fanboy?

Evie Naufal

I mean, I'm with you.

Roland Naufal

What about you Maia, was it over the top?

Maia Thomas

No, not at all. It's nice to hear you being so positive Roland.

Evie Naufal

You can subscribe.

Roland Naufal

That can be a compliment.

Evie Naufal

You can subscribe wherever you get your podcasts or [@teamdsc.com.au/podcast](https://teamdsc.com.au/podcast) and give us five-star reviews anywhere.

Roland Naufal

We do care.

Evie Naufal

We do care, but only if they're five stars.

Roland Naufal

Okay.

Evie Naufal

That's it.