

Disability Done Different: Episode 24

Brent Woolgar on...living with your pants on fire

Podcast transcript

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Hosts: Roland & Evie Naufal

Guest: Brent Woolgar

Start of Audio

Roland Naufal

Welcome to Candid Conversations.

Evie Naufal

Disability Done Different Candid Conversations. It's not that hard dad.

Roland Naufal

Thanks Evie. That's the name and welcome, Evie.

Evie Naufal

Welcome dad.

Roland Naufal

And welcome today to Brent Woolgar one of our star consultants, our principal consultant expert in all things Specialist Disability Accommodation, SDA, and Support and Independent Living, SIL, which means housing. He knows about housing and he's going to talk to us a bit about housing, he's going to talk to us about engineering, about being a parent of twins, one of whom has a disability, and about being an all-around expert, good guy, engineer and Aussie bloke.

Evie Naufal

You were so close to doing a good intro.

Roland Naufal

That was good. Welcome Brent.

Brent Woolgar

Hi guys. How are you today?

Roland Naufal

Terrific. So I wanted to kick off Brent with, how come you've got the only non-air-conditioned car in Queensland?

Brent Woolgar

Yes. So as you mentioned, the engineering background has afforded me a pretty strong passion to all things mechanical. That's the type of engineering that I came from. And when I was facing the challenge of what sort of vehicle that was accessible for my son, Nathaniel, who has cerebral palsy, I just couldn't bring myself to buy the white van, the cliché for disability transport. So I was watching television one weekend with Nathaniel and the rest of the family, and there was a story about a couple of guys that had bought some combis. I think it was on the far North Coast of New South Wales and they were refitting them for disability day trips, and that started the mission. So went out and bought an old decrepit combi and put the engineer's hat on and four years later have the, what Nate calls his rockstar van. So that's how that came about.

Evie Naufal

Am I remembering correctly Brent, have you souped-up the exhaust on that van?

Brent Woolgar

I may have. It kind of sounds like a Harley Davidson. But again, it's sort of embracing the inner bogan, I guess.

Roland Naufal

So it automatically leads us into one of the questions Evie was wanting to talk to you about Brent which is, she asked you a while ago on our internal site channel, could you just tell us a little bit about the AT that you've got going on in your house?

Evie Naufal

AT, Assistive Technology.

Roland Naufal

Yeah.

Brent Woolgar

Yeah, sure. So obviously we're based in Queensland and Nathaniel's been an NDIS participant now for coming up on a couple of years. At the start of our journey with NDIS Assistive Technology to make the house a little bit more independent and safe, and Nathaniel was very much one of the top priorities for us. It was about 80% of the way there, but there was still some niggling bits and pieces that we could change. So anyway, so we got some funding in his first plan and we engaged an Assistive Technology expert who came out, and it's quite funny, we were standing on the driveway, looking at the house after he'd had a bit of a look around and his first comment was why don't you move. That was like wow, this is very progressive.

So you guys know me, that went down really well and so we had a further conversation. A couple of months later I get a quote through of just under \$60,000 to achieve what we wanted to achieve by this particular method, which involved quite a lot of modifications to the house. I didn't think that was really the appropriate solution so I embarked on a frantic Google frenzy of finding out what Assistive Technology was out there in the market. Probably three, four months after that, we pretty much finished everything that we wanted to achieve. We did it for about \$4,000, including a seizure alert system that's proven to be pretty good as well as controlling climate, lighting, security etcetera.

Roland Naufal

And almost all off the shelf products wasn't it Brent?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah, everything off the shelf. Nate's day to day sort of interface with his home if you like, is all controlled through his iPhone or his Apple watch. So right down to the seizure alert system is driven from an Apple watch application. So everything came from a mix of Bunnings and JB Hi-Fi and Harvey Norman, and all those sort of types of shops, but nothing specialist if you like, all commercial off the shelf.

Evie Naufal

Four thousand dollars, and it was a combination of nine apps and pieces of various hardware, right?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah.

Roland Naufal

And it's been an inspiration to you hasn't it Evie, I just want to jump in here because you've been inspired to talk about a website. So talk a little bit about that website, because I know part of it comes from what Brent's done.

Evie Naufal

Well one of the things that I love most about this story, Brent you know, I feel like I've told this story more times than you have because I like it so much. And one of the details, I don't think you mentioned then was that when NDIS first rolled out, the first thing your family did was get support workers for that sort of afterschool period for Nate, and that he hated it. You know, being, I think he's 17 or 18 years old now that he didn't want the support workers around. And that was such an interesting perspective for me because, you know, from within a service provision context, we often just kind of come with the assumption that the more support you're funded for the more support you get the better. And that was just a great little, no, no, that's not the case for everybody. And of course it's not when you really think about it. And so I just loved the story, how Assistive Tech actually gave Nate so much more independence than a person could.

Brent Woolgar

No, and I was just, I was going to sort of reiterate that story. So we had all the Assistive Technology up and running and again, we did all that ourselves. So it's all pretty much pretty easy to navigate. We're certainly not IT geniuses and we managed to get it all working and it would have been within a couple of weeks, and Nate, it afforded him the ability to start arriving home from school. He was in grade 12 at that point in time, independently let himself into the house, switch on what needed to be switched on, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And this particular afternoon because we didn't have a support worker at Nate's request, I arrived home and when Nate sort of hangs out after school to do his homework was just inside the door that leads in from the garage.

So I get home stroll through the door and just casually glanced at him and the usual, you know, everything all good, he goes yeah dad, everything's all good. And it was just a classic double-take because something just didn't look right on that first glance, and so I turned around the second time and he's sitting there in his wheelchair absolutely stark naked, huge smile on his face. And I'm like, what's going on here? And he just looked at me and he goes, you know, dad, this is the first time I'm able to be naked on my own. I thought, wow, that's just incredible. And it really for me reinforced, you know, that yearn for privacy and your own time. And for Nate, I'd never appreciated that, you know, he's very rarely had he been to the bathroom on his own. So, you know, some of the most intimate of things for a young man was always with someone else. So yeah, I think as an outcome of Assistive Technology, you can't get much better than that.

Evie Naufal

It really spoke to me that story about the power of Assistive Technology and simple technologies, you know like as you said, you're not an AT expert, and the AT experts didn't come up with the solution for you. That there were these simple off the shelf, smart home products that could just deliver 'me time' for somebody and that we often don't think of 'me time' as being you know, the goal that we should be working towards. And I think what also was shown to me through your story, Brent, is that there's not a lot of people in the NDIS who actually have the incentive to create the kind of solution you did. Because the service providers who are being paid to deliver the services are not likely to go, hey, did you know, instead of paying us, you know, X thousand dollars every year, you could pay 4K to, you know, be at home by yourself instead, you know. A lot of support coordinators are busy enough doing everything to, you know, necessarily know of, or even recognise that, the AT people obviously have an incentive to push people towards, you know, more expensive solutions.

I mean, I know everyone's got ethical practices to not oversell, but that kind of smart home technology, just simple mainstream products, it struck me that there there's a bit of a gap in the market there of who would be supporting people to identify you know, what might work for them. And so that's, you know, dad just mentioned before that I was thinking about putting together a website, but I know, you know, Sam Paor from the Growing Space has done a lot of work in helping to crowdsource different things that people have purchased with their low-cost Assistive Tech funding out of CORE. And it just struck me that there's an opportunity to get all the people like you, like Nate, who have been finding these solutions for themselves and trying to find some kind of central place to put those.

Brent Woolgar

Yeah. I think it's a brilliant idea. It's ironic because when we were setting it up and if we came to a particular issue that we weren't sure of, again the good old Google search, but there's all these I don't know what you call them, like user groups, online chat rooms, etcetera around each particular brand of product. So if you're having a problem with a camera, you go onto a chat room or a forum around that particular camera. And all these people that have been using it and setting it up with their solutions, etcetera, etcetera. And I think a way to centralise that sort of information for our sector would be incredibly powerful.

Evie Naufal

Even the work I know you did with like Alexa and Google Homes, trying a bunch of them to see which would best work with Nate's speech patterns, and even share some of that experimentation would be so valuable.

Brent Woolgar

So really interesting event a couple of months ago. So talking to a group of people at a disability service provider, and one of those had been to one of the courses that Sal and I ran last year around housing options within the NDIS and she was really quite agitated I guess initially when she spoke to me and it was around.

So I mentioned earlier that Nate uses a seizure alert application on his Apple watch, and she almost accused me of being negligent for the wellbeing of Nate because I was relying on this Apple watch application and whatever. And it was just like, I think some of that misinformation is what drives this push for Assistive Technology, it has to come in this really shiny box and it has to come from this very unique organisation and it's got to cost \$60,000, otherwise its crap and it's just not the case. So that the application, the seizure applications out there have both been developed by leading universities in America, and they've got extensive testing and refinement, and there are constant updates. So I do think a lot of the issues or the challenges we face in Assistive Technology to embrace the stuff that's just commercial off the shelf technology is there's a bit of fear-mongering going on that. You know, would you trust the life of your child with something that you bought from Harvey Norman, and it's just like, well, yes, yes, I would.

Roland Naufal

What sits underneath this Brent, the need to overcomplicate it, so I'm not going to make any friends here, but I don't mind. I worked for a big vision impairment organisation, one of the biggest in Australia, and they were \$3 million into a \$5 million development of a talking book program, and the iPad was well into development there, and the iPad and audible talk to you. We didn't need to spend another \$2 million developing proprietary hardware that had to be sent out to vision-impaired people, proprietary talking books that had to be sent out to, but people wouldn't acknowledge that it was out there and we just kept on spending the next sets of philanthropically funded millions of stupid dollars. And the other one is I worked with a bunch of specialist OTs, probably one or two of them are listening, working in Assistive Technology that would come up with incredibly complex solutions for people then not be available to support them, and they would always sit in cupboards. Very expensive solutions that sit in cupboards. Why do we need to overcomplicate shit that doesn't work?

Brent Woolgar

Well I think it is that classical story of the IT project that's developed by an organisation where IT is not their core business, you know. And there's so many case studies all the way from the Australian Federal Government through to, you know, small mum and dad organisations that have this idea

about, you know, we can automate something or we can come up with this brilliant IT system to do something and it'll make us all millionaires or it'll make our life better, etcetera, etcetera. But you know, if you speak to people that are IT experts and IT project managers, and you say, right, what project are you working on, project X, Y, Z original budget was a million dollars and we're now up to \$4 million, you know, just time and time again and that's the experts. So a mentor I worked with many years ago basically said, if you're not an IT expert, your organisation should not be developing IT projects, and that's really just stayed with me forever and I believe in that very strongly.

Evie Naufal

Yeah, that's what Roland always says anytime I say, I want to develop software. He says, over my dead body. DSC will not be developing IT anytime soon. I want to take this conversation somewhere slightly different Brent, which is to the topic of SDA. And while we're talking about, you know, how a built environment can influence how somebody is able to live in their home. I wondered if you could share some of the stories you have Brent about the robust category of SDA and the difference that a built environment can mean for somebody whose house fits into that kind of category?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah, sure. So, you know, as you know, robust is generally the category of SDA that a participant would be found eligible for if they generally have psychosocial behavioural challenges that they're facing in line with all things SDA, it's usually the people towards the very extreme end, and that's the NDISs language, Extreme Functional Impairment that will be eligible for the funding. So you're looking at a cohort of people that have, I don't like the term 'challenging behaviours', but they have behaviours that for a lot of people are difficult to understand what's driving those behaviours. In a lot of cases and there hasn't been a lot of research in it, but there's a bit out there from around the world, researching how the built environment can influence behaviours in that cohort of people and the small amount of research that's been done previously, there is absolute direct correlation. Because quite often people have behavioural triggers that are associated with smell, you know, with the five senses effectively. So for one person the trigger might be a pattern or a colour, for another person it might be an environmental noise, for another person it might be a smell or a texture or something like that.

So understanding that fundamental driver behind a person's behaviour, and then building an environment around that person as best you can to eliminate those triggers obviously results in a fantastic outcome for the person. Because you're reducing those environmental triggers to a point where hopefully the incident of behaviours reduces which means the incidents of, or the need for person to person support reduces, which is kind of then becomes this continual momentum if you like, that the person's behaviours are improving and less support. And quite often the support is also one of the triggers for the behaviour, so you just get this sort of perpetuating improvement in people. And we've seen that in a couple of the early robust projects that have been done well since the SDA funding has been made available. But I do have to say that out of all of the categories of SDA, robust is the one where there is probably the least supply. And I think if you think back to how SDA is constructed, they put together a pricing scheme that's better than a market return to attract private investment to deliver, you know, billions of dollars of disability accommodation.

Evie Naufal

There's one story in particular I'd love you to tell Brent, the one about the water?

Brent Woolgar

Ah, yeah, right. So this particular young gentleman loves water, doesn't particularly like wearing clothes, even if it is freezing outside. And when I first got introduced to this gentleman, his support environment or his world if you like were two security guards and two support workers, 24/7. So he'd been in the justice system, in and out of the justice system, homeless, you know, unfortunately not an unusual story for people with extreme behaviours.

So in this particular case, the built environment that was created for this gentleman involved an outdoor pool, very shallow so that there could be no increased risks with a lower level of supervision, and that pool was three meters by three meters. And then inside the house in the bathroom, there was a very similar pool that was two meters by two meters. And so for a vast majority of the day this young man would circulate between the inside pool and the outside pool depending on temperature and what was happening. And last time I checked in he was down to no more security and at times

one support worker and at other times two support workers. So a massive reduction in his supervision if you like, because he now lives in an environment that means his behaviours aren't anywhere near as challenging as they were previously. So just a fantastic outcome.

Roland Naufal

It is. When I met you, it's quite a few years ago now Brent and you were a consulting engineer, you were a parent of two twins and they must've been 11 or 12, and you talked about wanting to get into more actively in the disability support sector. And I had my doubts that you would be one of those parents that would be able to generalise past the needs of their own son or daughter. And you've turned out to be awesome in your ability to look at systems and systemic change, and I just wonder about that journey for you in a sense of, you're an engineer, you're a parent and you hit this wacky evolving NDIS, SDA is equally wacky and evolving within in it. And you go on the ride and you learn so much, and you're so generous, you offer so much pro bono work. You're still doing two full-time jobs. You're generous of spirit and you're good at the systemic stuff. Can you reflect a bit on how you're able to do that, how you're able to immerse yourself so much in this sector that you weren't really part of?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah, sure. And first, thanks for the compliment. I think, and it's funny, because I assume at some point my wife will hear this and she'll probably have a very different opinion to what I'm about to say because at times it's been challenging for her I think just because of the level of commitment I feel to the sector. And I think for me, I've always felt this real weight of responsibility. I don't like being one of the people that sit back and throw rocks at something that may not be going as well for them as they think it should be. And I guess it can be put down to one of those male traits of, you know, always wanting to find the solution. But I've always had that sort of feeling that to make something better, you've got to get in and really understand it, and then from a systemic perspective, actually try to influence what happens. And I think, you know, the NDIS is the biggest social change in Australia forever pretty much, and obviously having a son that has a disability just makes it even that more personal for me to make sure as the NDIS evolves, that it evolves into the best possible system it can be for people with disability. You've only got one shot at it.

Roland Naufal

Yeah. I remember you telling me that you're one of those people that likes to sit in bed at night, reading manuals and legislation and regulation, you'll actually eat the detail. And the detail in the SDAs on Specialist Disability Accommodation and SIL, which are both your areas is beyond me. I kept up with it for about three or four years, and then I let go of it for about six months and I'm no longer on top of the detail of the SDA. I wonder if you could do a little bit of, the most common question apparently financial advisors are being asked at the moment is what's the value of real estate doing? Can you give us some insight into where you think the SDA property market's going over the next couple of years giving you, I'll give you my insights that I think that the other market, the broader property market's in deep trouble, that's not an insight, it's obvious, where's SDA going?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah. Look I think SDA, you know, over the last three months, there's definitely been probably the greatest level of that initial inquiry, so from people that, we've had, DSC have had no visibility of previously and then a phone call or an email will come in saying, oh you know I want to learn more about SDA. Can you help? And that's no doubt being driven by the likelihood that the mainstream real estate markets going to suffer for the next couple of years, hopefully not as bad as everyone's predicting. But obviously there's going to be something happening and so I think there are a lot of people that are turning to SDA to understand it a little bit more. And so I think SDA overall, it's been a really slow journey and that's not necessarily a bad thing, it's slower than it probably should be, but it's also better than this mad panic. And all these really bad properties being built in bad locations because once it's built, that's it, you know, once we reach the number of rooms that are required that's it. So I think taking it slowly and making sure it's done properly is not necessarily a bad thing.

Evie Naufal

Just want to jump in, quick catch-up in case you're not familiar with SDA. SDA is Specialist Disability Accommodation. It's a payment towards the bricks and mortar for super accessible housing and it's a part of the NDIS's effort to increase the stock of accessible housing in Australia. And it's only

Roland Naufal

28,000 out of the 460,000 participants.

Evie Naufal

But 6% of NDIS participants will receive an SDA payment in their plan.

Roland Naufal

One of the more interesting things too about SDA Brent, and I get the sense from you and probably don't want to comment on it further, but the last 12 months it's coming together, it's starting to work and I'd be interested to hear your comments on that, but you're also dealing with the very pointy end. Like you said, you get a bunch of pretty weird people ringing up saying, I want to build a house in my backyard, or I'm going to build a block of 10 flats, or I'm going to, you get a lot of that Numnuts developers that want to do stuff and are clueless and you seem to have endless patience for those people. Tell us about it?

Brent Woolgar

That's where I feel that weight of responsibility that I was talking about just a few minutes ago. So at times I've been criticised by some people by being a little bit too purest and potentially not embracing new entrants into the SDA market as well as I should, and, you know, potentially turning people off, investing in the SDA market. So there's that friction point if you like between, we need this accommodation, but the other side of that is it's got to be done properly. At the moment I would say the vast majority of SDAs have been done really, really well, but there's still a certain portion of it being built almost on a speculative manner by people that haven't really spent the time to understand the sector and how an SDA project fits together, and they're building in some really, really stupid locations. So they're going to be, if they're fortunate enough, from their perspective to actually find residents to move into the SDA, these residents are going to be completely isolated from their community, which is just not acceptable to me in terms of an SDA outcome.

Evie Naufal

Yeah. Sorry. I was laughing before, because I was, I don't know if you mind me saying, but I was thinking of the call you got the other day of the person who wanted to convert their motel to an SDA without any kind of renovation.

Brent Woolgar

Oh, we've had them all. I think one of the classics was that guy that phoned up that he had run childcare centres so he completely understood what it would be like to run an SDA and he wanted to build a whole bunch of five-bedroom group homes on this lot of land in the middle of nowhere. It's just like, what? I thought it was a prank, but anyway.

Roland Naufal

So Brent, you are a super generous person. You own or part-own an engineering business, you work full time with us, more than full time with us, and then in your free time you manage to do pro bono work. You don't talk about the pro bono work. I bet most of the consultants at DSC don't even know you do pro bono, but can you tell us a little bit about what gets you out of the house on a Saturday morning, other than the family needing to have you out?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah, yeah, sure. It does come back to that sense of if something's broken don't just stand back and complain about it. And because I'm from Queensland and pre-NDIS disability support and the sector in Queensland, it was just dreadful. So leading into the NDIS, I was just so fortunate to have connected with DSC and have this amazing team of people around me that, so I won't tell you about our first planning meeting now, that's a different story, but needless to say, I was pretty well prepared for it and knew how to play the game. But going through that process of preparing for that first planning meeting, it was difficult for me despite the fact that I was surrounded by all these experts and, you know, I could ask questions, etcetera, etcetera.

So it just occurred to me that there'd be so many people out there that just by no fault of their own would just not have a clue about what to do in preparation for a planning meeting and what to ask for

in the planning meeting. And so that really drove me to say look, I've got to do something, so reached out to some organisations that I had a good relationship with and just said, look, here's my details, you get a minimum of 20, 30 people together. The first Saturday of every month, I'll donate my time free of charge to go and talk to those people to actually give them some sort of NDIS one on one. This is what you need to be doing. This is how it works, etcetera. So that's kind of dropped off now obviously because a lot of people are now in the scheme so I've sort of transitioned my time now to more around housing. So helping families that otherwise wouldn't have the means to engage a big consulting company to help them out just to give them some guidance about this is what it is, this is how it works, and this is the process you need to go through and connecting them with people that will hopefully help them along that journey.

Evie Naufal

What does Nate think about his dad being so involved in the disability sector?

Brent Woolgar

Oh look, I think he thinks it's pretty cool at times that we are relatively, you know, we're pretty good at navigating the NDIS and he's got some great outcomes from his NDIS package and definitely has changed his outlook. You know, if the NDIS wasn't here, his outlook as it came, he was sort of those final years of school. His outlook would have been nowhere near as positive as it is now. So I think he's pretty happy that we've been able to get such good outcomes and relatively quickly, etcetera, etcetera. But Nate's a funny one, because if there's ever a person that, and in his words 'hates being disabled', it's him. And that's probably for him, I'd be much happier if dad wasn't involved in the disability sector because he's involved because of me, that's kind of his attitude.

Roland Naufal

So our producer, Maia Thomas insisted to ask you about the twins graduation, which was just last year, wasn't it from high school?

Brent Woolgar

Oh yeah. Thanks Maia. You're going to get me crying now. So twins, so I'll give them a name instead of the twins. So Sebastian and Nathaniel or Nate, and Nate as you know has cerebral palsy. So yeah, it was, the graduation was an incredibly, you know, just a beautiful event, really emotional, but I think that emotion was a mix of just, you know, wow, we got here. Which I think if there's any parents of children and young adults with disability that have had that disability for a long portion of their life will understand that, you know, navigating early childhood, navigating education, all of those things are just exhausting and a battle. You know, and we had obviously identical twins, so you've got that constant comparison that, you know, yes, Sebastian can just go and enrol and do this and he can do this and he can do that. Whereas everything with Nate was, oh, how are we going to make that work and what problems are there going to be and etcetera, etcetera. So, but yeah, just getting to that event.

Evie Naufal

It's a big deal?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah. Yeah. I think that the actual graduation evening, the emotion was a mix of just a typical parent, just being proud and a bit of exhaustion just going my God, it didn't need to be that hard. But you know we got here in the end and I think in some ways that drives that pro bono work that I like doing to help families, that the number of families that you meet, and this isn't just Queensland. And as you guys would know, you know, you just meet people that are in absolute distress, not coping, you know, can't really see a path out of their misery or whatever they're experiencing. But it's there, and I think having been through that process now and got out the other end of it, I do want to help people sort of navigate that pathway because you know, there's really great outcomes.

Roland Naufal

And while we're talking about the boys' Brent, I just want you to remember a couple of years ago, we're standing in front of an audience of about 150 people, you and I are on stage. And I asked you this deep and meaningful question about having twin boys 15, 16 years old at that stage, and seeing

the difference between them one with disability and one without, and I asked you, you know, what did that difference mean to you? Do you remember your answer?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I get reminded the answer quite a lot. So the answer was primarily yes, sure. Identical twins, one with a significant disability, one without. So you initially think, wow, there's going to be all these real differences, but ultimately they're both turds, they're both late teenage boys that think they know everything. Obviously, you know going through various stages of life and exploring girlfriends and relationships and alcohol and whatever else. But yeah, they're literally from what I'd call the turdyish aspect, are exactly the same, but oh boy, yeah there's not a lot of difference when you really boil it down.

Roland Naufal

Brent, we've spoken to you sometimes and you talk about the difficulty of being a parent, not a parent of a kid with disability, just difficulties of being a parent, and that in some ways inspired you to write a book quite a while ago. Do you want to tell us a bit about that?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah, sure. So the motivation for the book came when I was sitting in my furnished apartment that I'd moved out when my first marriage fell apart, which was when the boys were about three, three and a half years old. And obviously having to, for the marriage to end and having a lot of spare time when I wasn't at work, I just got thinking about, you know, what happened, because everything was just a blur from when the boys were initially born premature. So started doing a bit of reading, trying to get my head around, just trying to understand a bit about what was going on. And it became really obvious that particularly for males there was nothing out there in terms of, you know typical male, I'd like to do a Google search saying, you know, my child's just been diagnosed with cerebral palsy, what the fuck do I do? And there was no response. There's nothing. And I just thought, wow, that's not good because there's going to be thousands of other people just like me sitting in their serviced department, wondering what the fuck just happened.

So I started gathering together information and research that I could find, mixed it with my thoughts, and over a period of about 18 months, it turned into a book that I called 'Fracture'. And the title Fracture came from comparing your life and the moment when for our, in my experience, it was walking into the intensive care, the Neonatal Intensive Care and being told by a doctor that your child has got brain damage and is likely to have cerebral palsy. And I likened that point, that exact moment in time to a person, you know, suffering a fracture of a bone and how you treat that fracture from that exact point in time when it happens, depends, you know, absolutely determines the outcome. You do what you should do. Then the fracture grows. It's actually stronger than it ever was and everything keeps going great. If you ignore it and kind of don't seek the right advice around it, etcetera, etcetera, it won't heal, and in fact it will get worse and everything will fall apart, and that's where I got the title Fracture from. And it is, as I said, very much focused at helping us very unusual males at that point in time when potentially a child with disability is introduced into your life.

Roland Naufal

We'll make it available because you've got it online haven't you Brent, we can make it available through the show notes.

Brent Woolgar

Yeah. In all seriousness it literally, my motivation was just if it helps one dad understand their reactions to the news about a child having a disability or, or not or, and understanding how their wife is going to respond because that lack of understanding in people's responses causes the fracture.

Roland Naufal

So while we're prodding around inside your personality, you're not just a consultant, you also do a lot of other things. One of which is you're a presenter with us, you present a lot of workshops, a lot of webinars and I asked Evie who's the manager of that area in our business, what's your favourite thing about Brent as a presenter?

Evie Naufal

I've told you this Brent, but I love the way you combine being every Aussie bloke and this staunch human rights advocate. And so you'll be talking about human rights, but you'll be doing it in a way that's like, well, it just seems like the right thing to do so we did it. And I love that. It's so easy to hear what you're saying. It doesn't feel, you know, it's like, yeah, cool. Let's do that then.

Brent Woolgar

Yeah. Yeah. And I very much look at it as, okay, we've got the NDIS, and it's fantastic. We've got in the NDIS SDA, which is also fantastic. We've got a support system SIL, Supported Independent Living that fortunately or unfortunately, whichever way you look at it goes hand in hand with SDA at this point in time.

But the way I approach it is that's what we've got. We don't have anything different at this point in time. And what we've got is so much better than what existed five years ago. So let's make what we've got work the best it possibly can, whilst not losing sight of the big game and that's the human rights game. To make sure that we don't just settle for, God if it isn't perfect, but let's make sure that we're using what we've got right now. And making sure that we're absolutely delivering the maximum benefit we possibly can to people with disability and then as this increasing undercurrent, drive the human rights side of it and say, right, this is good, but it needs to be better and this is how it can be better and let's go and do it. And you know I think we're getting there. It's just going to be a long journey.

Roland Naufal

I want to just ask one more question Brent, which is about COVID, and you and I have had a number of discussions where I'll speak about myself, I found COVID extraordinarily difficult at times. I was drinking way too much to the state now where I've just stopped drinking altogether, it's the only way I can cope. I know you found it tough too. Do you, can you share anything with us about your COVID journey?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah, look, I think for me it was that, a couple of things. So the restriction obviously was really difficult to come to terms with I guess. I've always been as my lovely wife Jackie would say, I sort of live my life a thousand miles an hour with my pants on fire and that COVID didn't allow me to keep doing that. So I had to slow down, I didn't have any choice. And for me that was something I hadn't done for forever, for a long time, and I didn't know how. And like you Roland I think I was drinking more than, I know I was drinking more than I should've been. And yeah, it was far more difficult than I'd ever anticipated. And you know, I really feel for you guys having to go through 2.0, that's something that I'm dreading.

Roland Naufal

Yeah. We're not laughing that one-off. It is hard.

Brent Woolgar

It's really, it's been interesting as well because one of the, if I put my parent hat on and Nate's NDIS participant hat on. And for someone that was in that first year, post completion of school, the response to COVID for a lot of organisations that obviously have had to shut down all sorts of services that they were offering that congregated people with disability. It's really had quite a dramatic impact on options for Nate in terms of, you know, SLES, skills training, all of those different sort of opportunities that the NDIS is graciously funding for school leavers to try to develop a real future, and it's really been limiting for him. And that's been tough on all of us.

Roland Naufal

I've heard that a lot from parents of adolescents and older or younger adults or people with disability that are really, they're really feeling the pointy end and you're helping me understand it a bit better Brent.

Brent Woolgar

Hmm. Yeah. It's yeah, it's been tough for him because he, as you know, Nate loves, he's involved in a university-sponsored swimming program to try to get some Australians up to Olympic qualifying standard. Because Australia's Paralympic team does not have any Paralympic swimmers above or

below whichever way you want to look at it, what they call a level seven, which for a level seven disability, it means, you know, you might have a sore finger as opposed to, you know, level ones and twos, which are significant cerebral palsy, you know, triple amputees, etcetera, etcetera. So he's been doing that program for three years and that was really it, that was his baseline of his life. Lots of training each week, lots of social activities, etcetera, etcetera, and that stopped at the same time as everything else stopped. And so, yeah, it was really tough for him to go from being pretty active, to staring at himself in the mirror or unfortunately staring at a computer screen most of the day.

Roland Naufal

Can you tell us quickly about the social enterprise you and he are setting up?

Brent Woolgar

Yeah, sure. So the social enterprise came about from looking at options for Nate post-school and what's out there and what I, the terminology I use is, I want a career path or a future for Nate that's real. I don't want a role or an opportunity that's fabricated around Nate's disability. I want there to be an opportunity that if it's Nate or if it's his brother or someone else that doesn't have a disability could equally engage with that opportunity and get a great outcome from engaging with that opportunity. So we just stumbled across the idea of, you know, like most young people Nate's pretty active on social media and I thought, well I wonder, you know, there's lots of small companies out there and lots of small businesses, the local takeaway, the hairdresser, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, that probably all have some form of social media presence. They're probably pretty bad at it. They don't keep it updated enough. I wonder if there's a way, there's an opportunity there for Nate to develop a social enterprise that offers small businesses social media management service.

And so we were fortunate enough in partnership with Wesley Mission in Queensland to actually get an ILC grant to do a feasibility study. So we approached a bunch of local organisations to gauge their interest, if they'd like to participate in the feasibility, it wouldn't cost them anything apart from a bit of time, ended up getting about 30 businesses interested. Cut a long story short, ran the feasibility and it's feasible on a fully commercial basis to provide people with quite significant levels of disability a real job doing real work for real organisations in a real commercial environment. And it's in an industry that has a real future, so it's kind of a win all round. So yeah, that's something I've been pretty passionate about doing in my spare time.

Roland Naufal

We've been talking to Brent Woolgar, Candid Conversations. Thank you, Brent coming to us from Queensland, a very different state to, in a very different state to where Victoria's at at the moment. Thank you so much, Brent. That's been great. It's been really good talking to you today.

Evie Naufal

Thanks Brent.

Brent Woolgar

Thanks, Roland and Evie, it's been great to talk through all these different things. It's been awesome. Really enjoyed it.

Evie Naufal

Yeah, me too.

Roland Naufal

Cool.

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