PEARLS OF WISDOM

In the pursuit of ordinariness

Dale is a young man who works in his own profitable lawn mowing business. This seemingly simple statement is, in fact, a highly significant one for Dale and his family. It reflects a long term plan finally brought to fruition and foreshadows a hopeful future.

In many ways it is not surprising that Dale has reached this point in his life. Although he has lived with many challenges, especially in terms of his learning, his family was always driven by the principle that his life should be a typical one for any boy or young man his age. This strong belief has influenced and permeated all the continuous thinking and more concrete planning that have shaped Dale's life since he was very young.

It is not always easy getting the balance right between the desire for the typical and Dale's need for support. His mother, Anita, talks about the time when Dale started High School. The plan was for him to catch the train, as many other students do. This was also seen as a good way to meet and get to know other kids from the school. Dale, however, needed support to travel by train and at first Anita accompanied him. A reasonable enough solution, it seemed. But it was soon apparent that the other students were not particularly interested in talking to a 14 year old boy sitting with his mother. Certainly not a typical scenario on the morning train to school! Anita needed to reassess her role in the plan and come up with another solution.

Two young support workers who had continued to be involved with Dale on a social level decided that they could do the train trip. Travelling with a young, attractive female friend or with another young man made Dale a far more interesting person to get to know than one who travelled with his mother. As well as catching the train with Dale they were quite deliberate about connecting him with other students.

After two months of travelling with these young friends, Dale was able to negotiate the journey on his own. Anita limited her role to talking with the school about the travel plan and was happy when they suggested that some of Dale's class mates could walk with him to the station. Being clear about her role, and the role of others and their ability to influence, was an important lesson for Anita and one that she has applied in other areas of Dale's life.

Another important lesson was to slow down and analyse what was happening. Dale would still have ended up travelling to school on his own if his mother had continued to do the early journeys with him but, as Anita, said this was not the only aim of the plan. To stay faithful to the original idea of the "typical journey" and the opportunity to make friends required more work and took longer to organize but she believes that it was worth it. Having an overarching plan and an eye on the future also enabled Anita to work through her fears. It would have been much easier and less stressful to have done the transport herself. The family now sees the benefits of those early days as Dale travels independently everywhere in Brisbane and to the Gold Coast by train and bus.

Although the "typical life" principle had always been a touchstone for deciding what should happen for Dale, the opportunity to do some explicit, facilitated planning with a group of committed friends and family was an important next step for Anita.

Planning for and with Dale began long before he had finished school. As Anita said, "People don't usually wait until they are guaranteed an income before they start planning what they will do when they finish school so we weren't about to wait for any funding before we started planning what could happen for Dale. Although we had lots of ideas and were used to thinking strategically, having a formal planning session gave

us space to "land" the ideas and put some structure around our 'planning' mindset. It took us through, step by step, how some of the thoughts we had always had might actually be put into action."

Dale was 14 when the family started planning in a more formal way. With the driving principle of a "typical life" directing the planning, the group came up with the idea that many kids at that age have a part time job and for many of them this job is at a major fast food place like MacDonalds, KFC, or Hungry Jacks. After some perseverance in approaching these outlets, Dale secured a position at KFC where he has worked for over three years as a successful and award winning employee. When he started work at KFC Dale was supported by a paid worker for a short time. KFC management and staff decided quickly that they provided better support than anyone else. A friend of Dale's checks in periodically with KFC and has helped out in Dale's training so he could work in different roles. Taking the time to analyse what was happening for Dale, having the right people to assist and keeping the long term vision in mind, was again a successful strategy in making this plan work.

Despite KFC being a casual job through school, Dale has kept one shift while building up his mowing business. The business was also part of a long term plan that had been bubbling along all through the years when Dale was at school.. His father originally managed the business and Dale first worked for him during school holidays. When Dale finished school, it was time for his father to leave the practical side of the business and the family needed to find someone to support Dale to take over. Again, the planning centred on what was typical in this situation. The first attempts to find someone for this role were not successful. Focussing mostly on the support aspect resulted in workers who were neither enthusiastic about the actual business of mowing or, in one case, acknowledged that they did not actually believe in what Dale and his family were trying to achieve for Dale's future.

Anita persisted, however, and changed the focus of the recruitment to find someone who was interested in the mowing business. From an advertisement on the gumtree website, they found an older man who has his own mowing business that he was scaling back, but who was interested in working with Dale three days a week. They work together as two workmen, not as support worker and client. Dale and his worker enjoy their work and share a common enthusiasm about their craft. They have their challenges but they are openly shared, and everyone is supported by Dale's business team. Having a business team that includes people outside the family gives Dale and the worker an option to discuss issues that they may not want to discuss with the family.

The ability for Dale to earn a good income has been a long term goal for him and his family. The aim is for Dale to become financially independent, no longer reliant on the pension. So far he has been able to plan travels to Bali and China and will soon be moving into his own home.

All the thinking and planning that led to this point have been worthwhile but, as Anita acknowledges, who knows how long this arrangement will last? She is philosophical, about inevitable change. "It is tiring and frustrating at times when people move on from Dale's life but we need to remain vigilant about how things are working and we know that his needs keep evolving too. It helps to have other people around, people who believe in what we are doing and who are prepared to help with brainstorming and planning. We found we needed to be very strategic, not just in the planning also in but who played out the various aspects of the plan.

It's also important to understand that, in a way, we had always been 'planning', using what was typical as the starting point. However undertaking a formal planning process helped us to take action on our ideas. This style may not be for everyone, but a structured plan really helped us to focus. We can't know what will happen in the long term so all we can do is set things in place now that will help secure Dale's future. His life will change, as all our lives do, but if our planning works then Dale will continue to live a pretty good life … the kind of typical life he is living now."