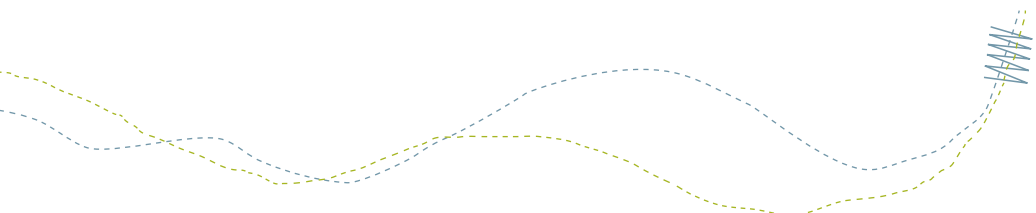


From where I was to where I am

Seven people talk about working in a social enterprise



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FROM WHERE I WAS TO WHERE I AM
SEVEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT WORKING IN A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

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Foreword

A MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER FOR EMPLOYMENT
PARTICIPATION, KATE ELLIS

Social enterprises play a valuable role in providing social inclusion opportunities for disadvantaged Australians, and in particular, by helping people into training and meaningful employment.

The Australian Government recognises this and is providing support through the Jobs Fund, the Innovation Fund and the Social Enterprise Development and Investment Fund. This will help social enterprises expand their operations and continue to help disadvantaged job seekers across Australia.

The stories within this publication are a powerful reminder of the ways social enterprises can transform the lives of individuals.

The most compelling message in each of the eight stories is that the experience of employment with a social enterprise has helped people to feel more optimistic and confident about their future. Many of these people have moved into other employment, while others have set their sights on gaining new skills and training. The stories also show how important earning a regular salary can be, both for the independence it provides, and for the opportunities it creates to do other things in life.

The stories show that inspirational mentors and friendly workmates are crucial for the success of social enterprises and in helping people make the transition into work. One of the great strengths of the social enterprise sector is its ability to draw together a range of passionate and energetic people who are committed to creating social change in their communities.

I commend Social Traders for their role in supporting social enterprises, and Jobs Australia members for the employment opportunities they have helped to facilitate. This is an important record of the positive impact that can be made on the lives of disadvantaged job seekers, and the valuable role that social enterprises play in providing employment opportunities.

I congratulate the participants involved and thank them for their honesty and willingness to share their stories.

I hope you enjoy reading these stories as much as I have.

The Hon Kate Ellis MP
Minister for Employment Participation

Introduction

DAVID THOMPSON AM, CEO JOBS AUSTRALIA AND
DAVID BROOKES, MD SOCIAL TRADERS

There's been a lot of talk about social enterprises in the not-for-profit and government sectors, but not many people are really aware of what they do exactly, beyond recognising that they trade to fulfil some kind of social mission.

A variety of social enterprise that has in recent years attracted particular interest and investment from community organisations, philanthropists, and governments is the kind set up to provide a hospitable place for unemployed and disadvantaged people to learn and work. Examples of these social enterprises and some individuals who work in them are the subjects of this book.

There are two broad categories of social enterprises whose mission it is to build employment opportunities: 'intermediate' social enterprises, where it is expected that people on a pathway through skill development and work experience will move on to a job in the open labour market. They differ from what can be called 'destination' social enterprises, which have been established to provide employment for people on an ongoing basis – for example, the Social Firms model, which employs a minimum workforce of people with disabilities.

This book explains what happens in social enterprises, related from the perspectives of their employees. They explain what the business makes or does, their roles in it, and the kinds of new skills, job satisfaction and outlook on life that this affords them. Workers in these social enterprises also talk about their previous life experiences, and we also hear from their perspective about the kind of social support and responsive management they encountered that enabled them to grow and advance.

Though the social enterprises described in this book illustrate workforce participation for disadvantaged job seekers in practice, all employers have opportunities to work in these ways if they can. Social enterprises are arguably better at it because their business model means they typically recruit at least a proportion of their workforce from among those who are discouraged or excluded from the workforce: people with disabilities, young people lost from mainstream education, or refugees, for example. However, there is no reason why 'mainstream' employers could not also improve and develop their capacity to be supportive and responsive in similar ways. It simply means taking a longer view to develop worker capabilities: putting in time early in the process of learning and working, to reap the rewards later of committed staff who are proud and glad to be gainfully employed.

Though social enterprises are not always profitable, there are sufficient examples of commercially and independently viable and sustainable social enterprises in Australia and overseas to inspire community organisations, investors, volunteers, and unemployed people to work with dedication and commitment in them and for them.

We would like to thank the people in this book who so generously shared their stories. You are an inspiration. Thanks also to our interviewer, Thornton McCamish, for being so attuned to his subjects, for travelling widely to talk with them, and for the photographs.

SOCIALTRADERS



Ben Ross

BOYSTOWN PARKS AND LANDSCAPE

I grew up in Lithgow, a little town about two hours out of Sydney. I went to school there. I liked school, it's just that I was bullied a fair bit. And the way I retaliated – it was just bad. I couldn't hold my temper. So I got suspended a lot, and nearly expelled. I decided I'd leave before I did get expelled and have that on my record.



I left school in 2006, or 2007, can't remember exactly. I wasn't really working in Lithgow. There's not much work there. It's basically a mining town. If you don't work in the saw mills or the mines, there's hardly any work. Everyone in the town knows each other, so if you've done something they don't like you're basically not going to get a job.

At school I did a T-Vet course in automotive mechanics, which is a TAFE course you do in year 11 and 12. I only did it through year 11 because I didn't do year 12, so I didn't get any certificates or anything. I started a job as a mechanics' assistant but that fell through after one week because the old bloke shut up shop and closed down his business. That was in Bathurst, which isn't far from Lithgow. I'm pretty good with cars. All my uncles are pretty handy with cars – two of them are mechanics – and I've been taught by watching them over the years. I've had about eight cars and I'm only nineteen.

After that I did a bit of trial work as a cleaner, too. My mate got me the job and everything and at the start they told me it was going to be a paid trial. The idea was that after two weeks I'd get paid. But when two weeks came around, and I said Where's my pay? they said, nah, it was an unpaid trial. They just turned it round, because there was no contract signed at the start.

I had odd jobs over the years, just mowing peoples' lawns and going out collecting wood with people. To be quite honest, though, I wasn't really thinking about work after I left school. It was basically that I was really lazy. I'm not sure why. It was mainly the atmosphere of the town I used to be in. No one else had to work, so I didn't think I had to work.

Most of the people there either waste their lives on drugs, or go to jail or something like that. I hardly knew anyone who worked.

And the trouble is, there's nothing to do, so you just get bored. You start having criminal activities in the sort of atmosphere that Lithgow has. I didn't have too much trouble with police, just little things. I was stupid and got caught driving uninsured and unlicensed when I was sixteen, so I couldn't get my license for eighteen months. That was a big mistake. I haven't got a criminal record, fortunately.

I moved to Queensland in December last year because my mum moved up here a couple of years ago. I kind of needed to look for work because it's pretty expensive up here compared to NSW. Basically I got tired of just sitting around doing nothing, tired of having no money. And Centrelink doesn't get you very far. You go on looking for work allowance and they send you to a job service provider. I got sent to Boystown through Centrelink and it just went on from there.

Fortunately, Boystown put me on enterprises. Instead of me having to look for a job, they actually gave me experience doing paid work. I did a whole white card course first – that's OH&S, workplace health and safety. Then I went pretty much straight into the crew.

When I started it was a bit of a shock, yeah it was. The very first day was just really getting introduced to everybody. There's four of us on the crew, plus a trainer. The trainer on our crew, Terry, he's made it pretty comfortable for us to start off. When I first went there in the morning Terry introduced himself really quietly and gave me a toolbox, and talked about what we do at the parks. I was pretty nervous, but all the other boys on the crew were around the same age as me. We got on like a house on fire, right from the start. We have similar interests and stuff.

Most days it's the same, going around picking up the rubbish at the parks, and raking out sandboxes or blowing the footpaths with a leaf blower. On Mondays and Fridays we do 31 parks in different areas in Logan. There's something like 270 parks in Logan itself – I was

spun out when I first heard that! On Tues and Wed, Thurs, we sort of gradually work through those.

Week to week it's pretty much the same people, but gradually people get jobs and move on. It's not just boys. We've had two girls come onto our crew so far. They were pretty enthusiastic actually. One of the things we have to do is empty rubbish at the tip, and the first girl that started on our crew just jumped into the trailer right away and started emptying stuff out. That was a bit of a spin to see her go.

I like being outdoors. The days seem to pass pretty quickly. And we're pretty much all jokers on the crew. We just talk about stuff as we're doing it. I know it sounds like I'm sugar-coating it and stuff but I think the main thing I like about the job is making it a safe environment for kids. I hate going to a park and seeing glass and stuff like that around the park. It's really bad when you see a little kid running around with sandals or thongs and they get a piece of glass in their foot. And other stuff like syringes and stuff. It's really disgusting. The best part of my job is making it safe for people. And you do get a lot of compliments from people who are actually appreciative of us doing it, making a safe environment for kids.

Terry doesn't act like a boss, he sort of acts more like a mate. But don't get me wrong – you put a foot out of line and he sets you straight. There's arguments sometimes, sometimes people get fired and stuff. There's two guys that have left the crew under not good circumstances. The first one was a guy who didn't want to sit in the middle in the back seat. I don't know why. And the second one was a guy who didn't want to wear a broad-brimmed hat to stop getting sunburnt. So out you go. But Terry lets up a bit of slack, more than a proper job would.

I didn't have much work ethic before. Boystown sort of changed that. It's given me a bit of experience as well as getting me into new habits, waking up early and so on. Even exercise, you know? After being

lazy for so long, you start to think, "what are you doing?" And social experience as well, talking to people you just met. I've made heaps of friends at Boystown. I don't think I'd have half as many friends as I do now, having come up from New South Wales.

In general there's a big improvement. I used to have trouble keeping my temper. Not so much now. I'm getting more mature. My mum's noticed the changes. She's really proud of me. Now that I'm working I'm making more money, too. It's a considerable amount. It's still not what I'd like to be earning, or what I should be earning, but the money does make a difference. You can do more stuff if you've got more money. You get out more. You can go to the movies, or go bowling.

They have counselling here at Boystown, anything we need, anytime we need to talk to someone. Last week they had a financial advisor come in and talk to us about organising our budgets. She talked us all through it all. It's been different for me, trying to change from getting a fortnightly payment from Centrelink to getting a weekly payment from Boystown, so that was really good. I've done up a budget the way she showed me, how to work it out. It's actually working a bit!

But I would like to go into something along the lines of training, and get a bit more qualified and maybe get a job easier. Boystown help us line up training, too, if you want it. They run courses, like the white card that I did before. And they've got forklift courses too, for getting your forklift license. Some courses are free if you're not working, but because I'm working through Boystown I have to finance it myself, and I can't really afford to do that right now.

I'd like to get a job soon so that other people can have the opportunity like I've had.

I've been told that this isn't a proper job, that's it's just for experience. It's basically classed as a program. I know it's only temporary. It's meant to be six months, but they don't kick you off if it's been more. I've been here nearly eleven months.

It does help. Even a reference – you don't know how hard it is to find a job without a reference.

At Boystown they have us do job search every Thursday now. You have to look on the computers, or in newspapers, or call up jobs. There's three people at the enterprise services here who help us with all that, help you with job search. And always they're emailing out resumes to different jobs they see, or calling up. I'm putting a fair few applications in for different factory jobs. I don't really mind what work I get. I'm broad-minded, I don't really care what I do. A job's a job, as long as it's not too far from where I'm living, because I haven't got a car at the moment and I've only got my learners' license.

I know I can get a job off the skills I've got from Boystown, and do good work in the job because of those skills. In the long run, I would like to get into a career like a trade or something and one day build my own business out of it.

I'm feeling pretty confident about the future, a lot more confident than I was in Lithgow.

Coming up to Queensland was a good move. ■

SNAPSHOT BoysTown

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ESTABLISHED 1961

BoysTown operates a number of employment and training enterprises (landscaping, maintenance, graffiti removal) across four states employing 200 staff members and 140 client employees (trainees) at any one time, typically working in teams of 2-8 workers plus youth workers to provide additional support.

BoysTown also provides accredited and non-accredited training in areas of construction, metal fabrication, hospitality, horticulture, workplace safety, first aid, career counselling, job search and self-development.

Programs include Certificate I in Skills for the Future and Skills in Demand programs in fields such as manufacturing, aged care and civil construction delivered in partnership with local industry and TAFE colleges.

Susan Edmonstone

CLEANABLE

I was born in Geelong. I went to primary school there, and then in 1978 we moved to Werribee, where I've lived ever since. I went to Werribee High School until Year 11, and left half-way through Year 12.



I would have stayed if it had been like the current VCE, where you do year 11 and 12 together. But in those days suddenly the exams were there, and I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing. The school was very disorganised, so I don't blame myself for walking out and not sitting the exams, because I had no idea what we were meant to study.

After school I went to work at the Industrial Training Commission. Looking back I probably wish I'd stuck in retail instead of branching out to clerical. At school I had a part-time job at Target. I was on the fitting room. I liked it there. I could have stayed but I left, because I sort of thought clerical work in the city was better. It wasn't really, I just thought it was, because I was young and inexperienced.

I remember my first day at the Commission I was just opening letters, very basic clerical, and it didn't get much harder than that. But I stayed for two years. Then I worked for the ANZ bank for a couple of years, and then for the Ambulance Service in the city office. We did all the memberships. In those days we still sent out each one manually. It's all computerised now, and they've moved out to Doncaster. When they moved I left, because I'm in Werribee and it's a bit of a hike to get out to Doncaster. After the Ambulance Service there was some contract work at a bank, and I did a little bit of telemarketing. But then I was unemployed for a long time.

The trouble began in 1996 when I was diagnosed with schizophrenia, and I had two or three horrendous hospital visits that took me a long time to recover from. I tend to think of my life in two parts, I suppose: before and after I was diagnosed, though I think I probably had the illness before I was diagnosed.

I remember when it happened being worried about being able to work. One of the things I said to the nurses when I was hospitalised was 'I want to work, I want to work,' and they were just saying 'Don't worry about that now. You just have to think about getting better.'

Gradually things did get better. I needed that time in hospital. It was just two weeks, but it helped me get back on to my medication, make sure it was right. When I recovered I went on to Newstart and did some contract work at National Bank in the city. It was just clerical, sort of unskilled clerical work that anyone could pick up: filing, real basic stuff on the computer like changes of addresses and things like that. I enjoyed it actually. I must have been there about three months, but I had some difficulties with my illness.

I'd sort of stopped taking my medication because I thought, look: I've got a job, I'm well. But I descended into a sort of relapse.

Sometimes I'd start laughing uncontrollably. I ended up back in hospital for a little while, and then I needed a bit of a rest. I was lucky that my parents were able to care for me at that time. I went back on medication, and was fine again. Nothing like that has ever happened again.

I wasn't on the Disabilities Support Pension for a good six years after my diagnosis. I didn't get it until 2002, when a lady at the CRS¹ said 'Oh, you should be on DSP', and she got me the starter kit and I went down to Centrelink and filled out the package.

But back in the late 90s I had to go on Newstart, and there was five or six years when I just didn't get any work. I don't think it was because of my illness. I honestly don't know what it was, I remember that before, they had people looking for work for you in like Centrelink and they'd ring you up and say, 'Are you interested in this? Turn up tomorrow, then.' And you'd start. It's a lot easier if a case worker or someone can ring you up and help with looking. But that seemed to stop in the 90s, and people were out on their own sort of floundering.

¹ Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service

It was much harder to get the foot into the door. There was hundreds of people applying for the same jobs.

I did Work for the Dole for a while, around 2000. I worked in the office at a community health place in Laverton, doing office and clerical. You studied as well, and I was travelling to Northcote for computer training and that sort of thing. Confidence-wise, it was good for me, good for my self-esteem. And you do get paid a little bit more on Work for the Dole. It didn't lead to anything specific afterwards, though. I also did a lot of courses through Mulberry House in Werribee, which was formerly known as Shop Fourteen. I'd started going there in 1997. I did a lot of courses, night courses, retail courses. I did Retail, I did Excel, I did Word. I've got a folder full of courses that I completed. Just couldn't get a job out of them! It was a really dry spell for a while.

Going on disabilities in 2002 opened up doors for me, actually, like getting support, and finding out about training, and places like Cleanable. I was attending a day group at Mulberry House, and one day a person from WCIG² came along and encouraged us to enrol in training to help get back to work. I decided I'd do this cleaning maintenance course. They said: Are you sure you want to do it? It's hard work. I said: Yeah, I want to give it a go.

I think the course ran for two or three weeks. I completed it, but I didn't actually start work for another year or so, mostly because I was too scared to drive out of Werribee. I eventually got a job – I got it out of maybe ten or fifteen people who'd applied – and I had to drive to Fairfield. The first night I got lost on the way home, but I made my way to the city, and then onto the Westgate Freeway, and finally got home. I worked out later that you go past the zoo on to Flemington Road. Once I knew the way to go I was alright.

² Westgate Community Initiatives Group Inc.

That job was at the Mental Health headquarters. It was a challenge, a really hard slog sometimes. Sometimes if there'd been a party there was confetti, and streamers and everything... And at Christmas time they had a real Christmas tree, so there was all the needles that I had to vacuum up. It was hard work. But then that finished, because they wanted people who lived closer to that area. So it was only three months, a sort of preview just before I joined Cleanable. But it helped, because it meant I had a little bit of experience.

When I heard about Cleanable through WCIG they'd already been running for a year or so. I began with them in February 2007, working with another girl cleaning a dental clinic on Geelong Road, and at Jobco in Footscray. The other girl had a bit of a back injury, so I'd do the heavy vacuuming because I've got a really strong back. We were mopping, cleaning, dusting, sweeping, cleaning toilets. When I started I was very nervous, and tripping up on the vacuum cord, and, you know, everything that could go wrong.

Michelle and Peter, who were our supervisors then, they were very patient and very accepting.

They weren't critical. It wasn't like open employment in that way. And then gradually we became better on our own. We could feel our confidence building. We just worked two afternoons a week, from 1 till 5, but we were happy. It was only eight hours a week, but it gave me something to do. And also I could go out and say to people, 'Well, I'm a cleaner.' At least it was better than saying I do nothing. That was important to me because, especially within my family, I felt like a bit of a nothing. I mean, I was trying, but not really achieving anything.

I did that for a couple of years, the cleaning. Then when the shop opened two years ago I volunteered to work there. Mainly I fill the bottles for the domestic, clean out the back, do some ironing. I work at

the counter too. I was pretty pushy, I really wanted to learn the front of sale. I like working at the counter. Before the cash register, we had a little tin and a calculator, and then gradually we got everything. I learnt to do the computer and how to use the Eftpos machine. It's all very straightforward, really. The Eftpos virtually tells you what to do. The only thing you had to learn to sort of think: Is that change roughly right? The computer works it out automatically, but you want to check that you're not giving an astronomical amount or anything by mistake.

One criticism I get is that I tend to get a bit nervous and sometimes over-talk things... I'll talk about 'Oh, we've got this and we've got this', and I think it's sometimes too much. I've got to learn to hold back a bit. People who come in are quite pleasant and polite and enthusiastic about our attitude to recycling, the green stuff. Everyone's positive about that. I haven't heard one person say they didn't like the green ethic.

This is just a great job. It's great people to work with. Everyone is really nice. There's no bitchiness or backstabbing and people accept each other, disabilities or not, whether you're talkative or not talkative.

I'm quite happy doing my two days, Monday and Tuesday, and gaining more qualifications as I go.

If anything ever happened and this place closed, I'd have more of a chance of getting open employment now than I had before when I was long-term unemployed and couldn't get a foot in the door.

I've put the resume away for now. I update it, but I've put it away and I'm not desperately looking for work all the time. I'm 44 now, and they

say that it's harder to find work at a certain age. So I feel very lucky in that regard.

It's a good feeling working. I don't have to borrow money off my parents as much now. A little bit of extra money is always good because I was able to insure my car and insure the contents of the house I rent and I'd be really struggling to do that just on a pension I think.

Working itself just makes a difference. It gives me something to talk about with my family. My parents can say Oh, I might come into the shop and buy something. We're a close family. We all live in the one suburb. I'm the oldest of the four kids: I've got two sisters and a brother, and nieces and nephews now. I haven't achieved as much as my brother and sisters. I rent a house whereas my siblings all own their houses, or are planning to build a house, and they're all with partners. I've got a couple of friends who come around, but no partner or anything like that. I live by myself, with my little King Charles Cavalier, her name's Paris.

But I'm happy with myself. I think I've come a long way from 1996. It's been a long road, but it's been worth it in the end. I'm fully independent now and I feel like I've achieved something. And my mum actually said she's proud of me, so. That was something. It made me a bit emotional.

I think if any young people are reading this, I'd encourage them to stick with their courses, with Work for the Dole or whatever you have to do. Just complete it, and eventually it'll work out. Anyone who feels

scared, like I was, or nervous about travelling, and taking the first step and entering the workforce – it’s a lot easier with a social enterprise. Well, it’s not easier, but you probably won’t have bad experiences like being fired. I haven’t heard of anyone being fired here unless they have really aggressive behaviour, and I’ve only heard of that happening once. So it’s a very nurturing sort of company to work with. Firm, but nurturing as well.

I just feel lucky to be working here, and I’ll stay here as long as it lasts.

I like retail. Clerical was fine, but I like this better. Sometimes when I go to big stores like Kmart or Big W, I try to imagine myself working there, but I think the staff don’t look as happy. Maybe they’re a bit more tough on you in those places. The friendliness is the thing I think I like best here.

The teamwork, and getting along with everyone, the camaraderie. You can tell everyone loves working here, so they give it their best. ■

SNAPSHOT Cleanable

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ESTABLISHED 2005

Cleanable provides domestic and commercial cleaning services, and property maintenance expertise whilst engaging in a supportive environment for people re-entering the workforce who live with a disability.

With a workforce of 35 employees, Cleanable engages 15 Australian Disability Enterprise clients within the enterprise.

Matthew Wilson

ITEC REPAIR CENTRE

I grew up in Erskineville. I went to St Mary's, the local Catholic school. Didn't like it much. High school was a bit better. I can't remember school very well to be honest – it was a while ago. Can't really think of any subjects I liked, and I'm not going to say one just for the sake of it. I left at the end of year 8 when I was 15, I think. That was 2004.



It was pretty early to leave school. But they just told me to leave, otherwise they were going to kick me out. I think it was about my behaviour. I tried a couple of other schools, but they wouldn't accept me. So I just didn't bother after that. I didn't regret leaving anyway. Not then.

Probably I wish now I would have stayed at school longer. I would have liked to go to year ten, just for the extra education.

After that I just bummed around at home. I wasn't really interested in work then. And anyway, work was too hard to find. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I wasn't doing anything, really, just hanging around. I was worried about finding work. I dunno why. Probably because I was used to staying home. I used to, like, sleep in until the afternoon so I thought it'd be hard to wake up early to go work. I used to sleep till the afternoon because I had nothing else to do. I wasn't in the right frame of mind to do anything else.

I worked at McDonald's for a while. Went in drunk one day at something like two in the morning. I was only 15 or 16, and I applied for a job right then. They didn't interview me or anything, they just said to come in on Monday. I didn't know anyone there, just thought I'd ask for a job.

It was alright. They start you off on cooking. As far as training, the managers and that train you up. I had to cook burgers and things, and probably when you get a bit more experienced they put you up the front at the cash registers. I did that too, but I didn't really like it, because I'm not the sort of person to talk to people. I don't know, I think I'm a bit shy. Now I'm alright, but when I was younger it was hard. I stayed there about four months. Just got sick of it in the end.

Later on Centrelink got me signed up with Work Ventures. They help you look for jobs and things like that. They put me into a computer course. That's when I met Ralph Gatt, who's in charge here. He was running this IT course. The course was mainly showing us how to install software on computers and stuff.

Ralph said why don't I come down here and try it out. I done work experience here for two weeks, and then a couple of months later they said, did I want to work here full-time? It was my first real job. I would have been 18 when I started. I don't remember much about what I did on my first day. I met the warehouse manager, Ranko. I started out doing a traineeship. I did that for a year and three months. It's sort of on-the-job training.

And at the end of it I got a certificate in warehousing and distribution.

It was Ranko who was manager then, it's Russell now, he's in charge of all the Westpac PCs that come in. When I get here in the morning, I don't know, I guess I have a look at what there is to do, and then start work. I mainly just scan in computers and equipment that comes in from Westpac, from all the different Westpac branches. I just scan them, and it goes into a report back to IBM, so they know like what's come in and things like that.

So my job is you have to scan in the asset number, it's called. And we've got a sticker we stick on the item as well, we scan that. And then we scan the serial number. And then we've got like a book with the models in it, and all the different model numbers. We scan that, and another barcode which tells you the location it goes into.

Some equipment if it's redeployed it gets sent back to Westpac. But if it's not redeployed they donate it to us, the old stuff especially. There

are other people who donate stuff too... Juvenile Justice, Department of Commerce, Stockland, they all donate used PCs. Then we fix it up, refurbish it and resell it or whatever. I'm not involved in any of that. I just do the processing part in the warehouse.

I've been doing this for three and a half years. No one else does what I do, I'm the only person doing the scanning. There's always more scanning to be done. If you concentrate the time goes a lot quicker. Sometimes I find I'm looking at the clock. But if you're always looking at the time it will go real slow. But if you concentrate on something time will get quick. Everyone talks, too, that makes it more enjoyable. A lot of people like doing the same jokes and things, joking around with everybody. It's good.

I'll have lunch with people who work here. Not with everybody, because there's a lot of people. People my age are mostly in the other section. The people in my section have lunch at a different time from me. Usually I'll just get something from a café or McDonald's.

The people in the warehouse I've been working with for quite a while, but in the other sections, people come and go. There's one or two people at work I used to hang around with outside work. I get on well with the older blokes in my section, always joking around and mucking around with them.

It's good here, but I'm thinking about leaving, just because I want to make more money. I was thinking I might get my forklift driver's licence. But that's three hundred and something dollars. Not cheap. They don't have like the ride-on forklifts here in the warehouse, they only have them pallet-lifting things. You don't need a licence for that.

I think with the forklifts it's the only job I can think of that I'd like to do.... It just looks like more money. And it's easier than what I'm doing now. Not that this is hard, it's not really hard, it's just... forklifts would be easier I think. The concentration is hard here, I've got to remember

a lot of things. I have to remember where I put the things I've scanned as well. And I have to remember what location I've scanned it to. Every now and then something gets lost but you can always track it back on the system.

I live with my family. My mum, my little brother who's fifteen. Mum's happy because I don't have to get money off her all the time. She used to work, but not any more.

When I'm not here I might have a drink with my mates. I don't really go out after work with my mates any more. These days I wait till the weekend. I follow the rugby too. South Sydney, the Rabbitohs. I dunno why I started with South Sydney. I think because that's the club from my area. They train just around the corner from my place.

It's nine till five here. I don't really like the hours, to be honest. I'd prefer eight to four, something like that. Because by the time you get home and have dinner, it's almost time to go to sleep. You don't get time to do anything. It doesn't take me long to get in to work, though. Half an hour or so. I used to come in on the train, but I don't catch a train any more.

Now I ride my bike in to work, just a mountain bike. It's quicker than the train, though. It's good exercise, and you save money.

I don't have to pay for a ticket. The train's a lot of money, like eleven dollars or something a return ticket. Which is like, a hundred bucks a fortnight. Mascot is on a private line because the airport is the next station. It's a private line, so it's extra

Sometimes I think I should have stayed in school, but it's hard to say because I know people who've done year 12 and they're still out of work. So I'm not sure.

None of my mates are in work. Pretty much none of 'em. They just sit around I guess.

They've all got money, though – they get it from Centrelink. Some of them work, but like just every now and again. They don't have like a stable full-time job like this. I'm just about the only one who's working. I don't really talk to my mates about all that. They don't really say much about what they do, or want to do. Some of them probably wish they had a job like this too.

Work is more interesting than doing nothing sitting around like I was before. I like turning up every day. As a job it's better than nothing. I was always interested in computers anyway. I got one at home, though I don't really use it that much, it's mostly for the internet and music. But the best thing about this place is the people. Nice people here, good to work with. There's a group of people in the warehouse. Yeah, you talk to 'em. You socialise with them.

Sometimes I miss hanging around at home. Work changed things a little bit in my life. It's the money, mostly. It's more than Centrelink, and it feels better earning your own money. When I started on the traineeship, that was shocking money, but the pay's gone up since then.

I don't know about the future... Like I said, I'm thinking about going for a forklift licence. I do know that if I can, I'll stay in work. ■

SNAPSHOT

IteC Repair Centre

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ESTABLISHED 1986

As a division of the WorkVentures Group, IteC is one of Australia's largest electrical and IT services organisation, working in partnership with banking, retail, telecommunication, transportation and government customers.

Employing 85 staff with one trainee currently undertaking the Certificate II in Information Technology, IteC also supports over 80 work experience high school students in the re-use workshop.

WorkVentures Group is a non-profit organisation that fosters social and economic change in disadvantaged communities.

Verity Tancock

NGULLA NURSERY

I was one of fourteen kids. I was number thirteen. We grew up in Port Broughton, a little country town in South Australia on the Yorke Peninsula, near Port Pirie. It was great – Mum, Dad and all the kids.



I didn't have a very good education. Didn't finish year 10. All my brothers and sisters left school early, and I didn't think any different. We just worked in the town at whatever job someone was going to give you.

We were brought up to think you work hard for your money, and that's it.

It didn't matter what you did. Cleaning, or whatever. It's still a job. You're still getting paid for it, and it's still going to pay the bills at the end of the day.

When I was about twenty, my brother come over from Leonora, which is in the WA goldfields, about 250kms from Kalgoorlie. I said to him: I'm going to go back with you. And he goes: No, no, no! It's a whole mining town of men, and just a few girls. But I said: No, I really want to get out of here. So I come back over the Nullarbor with him in the ute.

My other brother lived there in Leonora, too: they owned a house together. They were both jewellers. And that's how I started in WA.

My brother got me job. He just walked into the assay labs there and said: This is my little sister. Give her a job! And they did – that's how it worked back then. The job was testing for the gold content. I was in the sample shed. When they brought the samples in, we put them in the oven, and cooked them. And then we'd take them into the boys' section and they would assay it and it would tell you how many grams of gold per ton.

I met my ex partner there – unfortunately. He was from Kwinana, south of Perth. When I got pregnant with my oldest we came back to Perth, lived in a few different homes. And then when I was pregnant with my second we moved out to Kwinana where my partner's mum was, and I've been in Kwinana ever since.

I did different jobs for a while. I worked for Oceanfast, and Tenix. Then around 1997, about the time my third was starting preschool, there was a chance to work for a guy who had a cleaning business. I thought: cleaning – how hard's that? I've done it millions of times. So my partner stayed home with the kids and off I went. We did the builders clean-ups – we'd go in and clean up all the mess after a brand new house has been built. But mostly it was cleaning boats and ships at Garden Island.

I had two young girls then. The younger one was actually my third – because I lost one after my first girl – and when she was starting preschool, I got pregnant again. Another girl! So I had to turn around and become a mum of a newborn again at the age of 32. I did it all on my own, too, because I separated from my partner when I was 7 months pregnant. My ex-partner traded me in for a 25-year-old. As they do.

I had a new-born and a six-year-old and a ten-year-old, so I went on the sole parent pension for a while. Then I got work at Oates Clean at Naval Base, near Kwinana. I was milling wire brush handles. I was making them out of one square block, and sawing them, and putting them through the mill to make them nice and smooth. That was fulltime. I could do that because thankfully I've got a really good mother-in-law. Twenty-three years she's been my mother-in-law, and she's wonderful.

Then I got put off. My oldest had left home by then, but I still had two kids at home so I just went back to social security and applied for the sole parent again. I just presumed that's what I should do. And they go: No, no, there's no such thing any more. You have to go onto Newstart.

They sent me to Bridging the Gap, who are a job service provider. They were really good. I was lucky. Bridging the Gap go out of their way to help you. It's not like other places where you go in, and there's a computer there and it's all, you know, 'look up five jobs and apply for

them'. At Bridging the Gap they really take you on. I went to them and they said yep, I had to start Work for the Dole. Which was two days a week for six months or until I got a job. When I was signing up and talking to the lady, she said: okay, how about the Good Samaritans? That meant sorting out all the clothes in the op shop. I thought, no – I hate washing, folding up clothes and all that. Then I saw a picture of Ngulla, of the nursery here. I said: What about that? And this lady goes: Oh, but that's all very physical work. I said: Yep, that suits me. I'll start there.

Bert was the supervisor of the Work for the Dole program. He met me at the bus stop at 8 o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday, and brought me out here. Back then there was no buildings, none of the sheds or greenhouses – it was all construction and mess. But even back then it just had a great atmosphere. Katrina, Pete and Bert... they made it a good place to come.

I thought: wow, this will be fun. And that was two and a half years ago. July, 2007. I never looked back.

I was learning how to plant trees, and how to seed them. I'd never thought about planting a tree from seed, and learning how to do it, and the propagation of it. I always loved gardening... It comes from my dad, who was a farmer, and grew every vegetable you can think of, every rose. We grew up with this immaculate garden. But until I came here I'd always bought my plants in a pot! So I found it really interesting. To actually see the growth from the seed. I began learning about other aspects, like cuttings, and fertilizers and the medias that we use. I realised I was really interested in this.

When I finished my six months on Work for the Dole I got a certificate – a hundred dollar voucher, and a presentation at Bridging the

Gap's award night. That was my first time of feeling, Wow, I must have done something for the last six months; I must have made a mark. There was a part-time job coming up at the nursery then and I applied for it.

My boss Pete had seen something in me, obviously, that I didn't think I had, and he hired me part-time. Now I'm full-time. I've been full-time for two years.

Right away I loved it, and I still do. You're getting out of the city, you're coming in, you're doing something different.

One side of the nursery is production, where we grow native stock for revegetation and for councils and housing developments. That's our bread and butter money. The other side of it is community. And because it's community you're meeting all sorts of different people in life, from troubled kids to disabled, the elderly... all sorts. Right at the moment we've got a Green Corps – that's young adults between 17 and 24 that haven't done anything much after school. They might have a few problems, or just don't know what they want to do.

We also have our community gardens where anyone from the community can come out and grow their own vegetables. We have some disabled people from Active, in Rockingham, who come out on their bus with their carers. They've got their own little vegies, they come out and water them, and look after them. Soon they'll be able to eat their produce. There's an arts group that comes out Monday and Friday, doing arts, sculptures, that sort of thing. We have volunteers who come out, too. Some of them are obligated – Centrelink sends them out to do their 15 hours a week of voluntary work or whatever – but usually when we get them out here they just love it. It's the atmosphere here. It's a community.

At the start I kept getting nervous. When you're away from your normal environment, where you know your own day-to-day, it's hard. I used to think: what if I fail? This is too hard. Because I didn't have that background education, I find spelling and maths hard. I like to be a hundred per cent sure before I put it down, or say something, so I get a bit flustered sometimes. Bridging the Gap hold these computer courses for people that have no computer skills. So my boss sent me off there and now I'm pretty good at the computer – at least I'm not afraid of it any more. My confidence is getting a lot better. Now I'm actually spelling words like the names of long botanic species. And it's like 'Wow! I can actually spell that!'

I've finished my Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management. It's the first time ever that I've ever got something that made me feel really good: a certificate.

It took me six months to do. Now Pete wants me to go for my Cert IV. He says: you're doing this stuff constantly all the time – you'll blitz it.

Now I'm teaching myself, teaching these young guys in the Green Corps, and all our volunteers and our disabled. At the start I found it very very daunting. Standing up and talking in front of people? But now it comes quite freely. I'm confident I know what I'm on about. I do find it challenging with the teenagers, and sometimes it's a little bit daunting working with disabled people. You have to remember, okay, slow down; this person isn't picking it up as quick as you're saying. And the ones who don't want to be here, but are made to be here, they can have issues. But we're all in it together, we all share our lunchroom together, share our day together.

When there's people in the nursery I'm basically teaching all the time. When there's not it's our time to pot up, and seed, and do everything

else that we do around this place. I've been breeding my frogs out here. I love frogs – they're one of my hobbies. I've got two ponds at home. I brought some out here to the nursery, and now we've got all these other frogs coming in from all over the place.

I've found a place where I don't have to be out of my zone. I can walk in here with confidence, and that's hard when you don't have that education, and you don't have that experience. It really is daunting. I think that's my main thing: that I can actually be confident about something. I'm more content now, than I was. People can see a difference. I'm always talking about my work at home, and everyone laughs because I'll go, 'oh, that's a *Allocasuarina humilis*'. And they'll go: oh yeah, right – how do we know? And I'll just go: well it is!

At home my mates, and my brother in law, will be like: 'Oh, I hate going to work.' But I'm like: I don't mind going to work. And they think that's really weird. I say, why don't you go and find a job you actually enjoy doing? And they say: there is no such job. But I've found one. I've found what I've always wanted to do. After 40-odd years of doing all the jobs that you just did for the money, because that's what you have to do, after all that time thinking, you know – this is life, I'll just raise my kids, I'll clean – now I can be happy about doing something with my life.

I'm achieving something, and it does feel good when you're achieving something.

Now I'm going around the neighbourhood and helping everyone out with their gardens. And they're calling on me like: can you help me with this? It's a bit like I'm a mechanic, or a painter.

I think it all boils down to this place, and Bridging the Gap, and my boss, Pete. Whatever I want to do, if I want to keep advancing...

I've just done my senior first aid a few months ago. And I thought, 'Oh look, this is going to be too hard.' But no, I passed and got my certificate, so I was really proud about that. And I get to go on water-wise courses, and do things like attend seminars at the Richgro Fertilizer company. I'll look around and think, all these important people are here, and little old me is here too! Wow!

If you want to do something you can do it.
And if you fail, it doesn't matter. I'm not afraid
of hard work. Hard work's never bothered me.
You just get in and you do it, don't you? ■

SNAPSHOT

Ngulla Community Nursery

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ESTABLISHED 2006

Ngulla Community Nursery provides a training and work generation platform for the disadvantaged indigenous and non-indigenous community.

Focused on growing native plants, the nursery employs two full time staff and 30 trainees in Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management for the National Green Jobs Corps, in partnership with PEEDAC and Bridging the Gap. The wholesale nursery also delivers training to horticultural students in production nursery.

Bridging the Gap began in 1979 in the outer Melbourne suburb of Noble Park. Local resident Fred Phillips was struck by the number of unemployed and distressed individuals he encountered on his daily walk to buy the paper. Garnering the support of the local MP and senior executives in the community, Fred began a coaching initiative which over the span of 10 years grew into a Western Australian Government strategy through the Joblink program. Bridging the Gap now reaches across Australia and across the world.

Anthony Turner

POST HASTE

I was born in the UK. We were born in – oh, god, it's going back a bit – Birmingham, I think we were born. I had three brothers and a sister. My older brother died a long time ago. He was severely handicapped, confined to a wheelchair. He wasn't able to come out when Mum and Dad emigrated. 1971, that was. We came out as ten-pound Poms.



All our schooling was done here. I went to school in Elizabeth, here in Adelaide. In normal state schools, but I wasn't in a normal class. I was in special classes in those days. I only have a minor intellectual disability – it was borderline when it was first diagnosed. But I didn't like school. I found it very difficult at times. A lot of the subjects were modified, of course, to suit the background of the people who were in the class, and a lot of the time it was one on one. But high school is a whole new ballgame.

I got through Year 8, but in Year 9 the social worker told my mum and dad I had no hope of going any further with my education. I was glad to leave, because I was going nowhere, in my opinion.

I don't think I had a lot of friends within the school. I think I was a loner. I'm still a loner today, I think.

So at 14 I left and went to Barkuma, which is another organisation similar to Phoenix. We were doing chip baskets, you know the ones that go in boiling oil and water? We were soldering them together. We also buffed up home phones for Telecom. All we did was clean up the outside of the phone with a buffer.

That's when I was told about Phoenix. They had a training unit over at Torrensville, and they asked me if I would be interested in doing woodwork. I hadn't been in the workforce that long at that stage – I was 15 – but I said yeah, okay, let's do it. So I went into their wood-working centre where we did a bit of toy making, and then I was moved into the main factory at Torrensville.

That's where my work life began.

I developed a very big interest in woodwork. They enquired as to whether I would like to do an apprenticeship. I started one, though I didn't sign any papers at that stage, because they weren't sure if

I could do it. With my spelling or what have you that I had in those days, they weren't sure I'd get through.

Anyway, I got to know the machinery in there, got working with people in there. In those days work for me was brilliant. I absolutely loved it. I still do. I eventually did sign apprenticeship papers, and then I moved to Bedford Industries in open employment. That was in 1988. I had a lot of help from people within Phoenix, and outside of Phoenix, to get the job at Bedford's. I was only there for six months, but to achieve the apprenticeship in the first place, and to get through it... My basic understanding wasn't great in those days, so I really did need a lot of help. And I got that help, and I'm grateful for it. I was being paid then, I think, a fourth-year wage for an apprentice.

After Bedford I went to Ashwell Frames, down near where I lived at Elizabeth West. They manufactured lounge suites. It was just the basic frame – there was no upholstery on it. So all I was doing down there was operating their four-sided moulder, which basically planes down four sides of timber all at once, and the cross-cut saw, which we used to cut timber for the guys to make the lounges.

For the first, I'd say, 18 months, I enjoyed it there, but after that I got pretty peeved off with the job. It only involved two types of machinery and I was really getting bored with it. And the other thing that really hit me was that once the support network was taken away, which it does when you move to open employment, I really struggled.

Within Phoenix, I can walk up to anybody and get help with anything I need. If I get stuck on something I can go and ask, I can say: Okay, how do I get this done? And they will sit down and explain it to you, one-on-one.

When you go to open industry, that doesn't happen. You don't get the support that I personally believe that people such as myself need: making sure that, one, you're able to do it; and two, being satisfied that you were able to do things correctly. When they take that away, it's devastating.

I lost that job in '91. I was let go, same as a lot of other people at the time. I moved into the unemployment queue, onto unemployment benefits. And okay, you've got to go out there and get yourself a job. I went to a number of interviews that didn't go anywhere.

Five years I spent on the unemployment queue, probably the five worst years of my life.

I did a few training courses in that period, through the CES, as it was then. But when I was unemployed it was like: you get up in the morning and you go to bed at night. You're doing the same thing day in and day out. That's when I first developed depression, quite deep depression.

I came back to Phoenix in 1996. I went to Gepps Cross, which is within the Phoenix network, out in the northern suburbs. It's woodwork there too, they make lounge suite frames, pallets for industrial places... there's a wide range of woodworking gear down.

For the first year I was getting moved around a lot, doing odd things, moulding borer and other kinds of machine, cross-cut saws and all sorts. I expressed an interest to move to the CNC router, which is a computerised router machine. It does everything in one go – it would do all your profiling of the wood, drilling – the lot, all in one hit. I got to the point where I could call up the program and set that thing from scratch, and get the supervisor to check it. So that was good. I loved it.

I worked there for eleven years. It was brilliant at Gepps Cross. Well, for the first nine years I enjoyed it. In the last two years, my depression started affecting me, and I was getting bored. In the end I felt restricted in what I was doing. I felt I'd reached the limit of what I could do there. I'd done me apprenticeship, I got the paperwork to say that I was a qualified wood machinist. But I didn't think I was working towards achieving anything new. It got to where it was an absolute chore to go to work, and in my opinion, it shouldn't be that. I requested to be moved onto something else, but they kept telling me that they couldn't afford to lose my expertise on that machine. My depression was starting to play up again, to the point where I moved back to four days a week.

One day I got that sick of it I walked into the office and said to John, who was the training officer at the time, I said: Look, I'm applying to go to Bedford Industries. I expect to get a response in four weeks. I'm leaving. And he said: 'What can we do to keep you at Phoenix? Is there anything at Gepps Cross that's going to keep you here?' I said there wasn't. John said, 'Well, let me make a few phone calls.'

He did that, and then he came down and said, 'I've got a position for you, but it's full-time.' I said 'Fine, what is it?' He said: 'Post Haste.' I'd been requesting Post Haste for years, before because I knew they were here, I knew they were a mailing bureau and I'd always had an interest in doing mailing. I said okay, let's go and have a look, and see what I think. I came through the place and said,

'Let's do it.'

September 2007 I came here, after being at Gepps Cross for eleven years. I haven't looked back. It's been a brilliant ride. Gepps Cross was good, but I needed to get a change in environment, and this place provided it. I came here with no expectations at all. I had to start again. It was daunting.

When I first got here I started on one of the insert machines in the machine shop. You've got an envelope, and say you've got to put a letter and a pamphlet, it will actually insert both of them, and then seal the envelope. Up to five thousand per hour. I enjoyed it. But then, after the first two weeks, one of my supervisors from Gepps Cross, Trevor Wake-Dyster, died suddenly. That was a shock. I was absolutely amazed that he'd gone – I'd worked with him for 11 years. He was the one that taught me the CNC machine, and he was absolutely brilliant. I considered him a friend. He and Phil Hughes, another supervisor at Gepps Cross, are two people I have a lot to thank for. Those two people were really amazing to me. They really were.

Anyway, I had to go on. And I did. I've worked my way from where I was to where I am now. Learning the machinery that's here has been a real big challenge. I can now virtually operate most of the machinery within Post Haste, and that's the thing I like about it. Mostly nowadays I work with the laser printers: we print letters and all sorts. Basically the customers send a program out to us and we centre the document, take it for a sign-off by the supervisor and release it to be printed. Then we keep it loaded with paper and check on the quality. I absolutely love it.

The money side of it is brilliant, because I can have things that I wouldn't be able to get otherwise. I have my computer, which I thoroughly enjoy, and I wouldn't have that if I wasn't working. I have a large-screen TV. I love films. And I've got my two little dogs. Kelly the Chihuahua, she's nine years old and came to me when I moved into my house. Millie's a four-year-old Pomeranian-cross. She came to me at ten weeks, just after I moved into my house. I live on my own in Morphett Vale, in a Housing Trust townhouse. It's public housing, but I like it. I wouldn't live anywhere else. I currently get a part pension, which covers the rent; the money I earn at Phoenix pays for everything else. I actually get more money here than from what I do with the pension.

I'm quite happy with that, quite happy. I'm pulling my weight, whereas others are happy to sit back and do nothing.

I don't drive, but public transport does what I want it to do. It gets me to and from work, gets me to and from shopping. And I've got a push-bike which I ride to Mums. I see Mum quite a bit, and I see Dad occasionally. They're divorced now. I have two younger brothers. One, who has an intellectual disability worse than mine, works at Torrensville. He does cleaning there. Another brother is on unemployment benefits. He doesn't have an intellectual disability. My sister has four children, one still at school, and she's now going blind. Yeah, a shame. She's now on disability pension herself. I see her every now and then.

When I move away from work, I'm a very private person. I think I've only got about two or three friends outside of work that I mix with regularly. I ran a ten-pin bowling league for ten years at Woodville Bowls, which I set up with a friend. It was a proper competition with different people and we handed out trophies at the end of the year. But I got bored. It became a chore again. And it was also becoming too expensive to continue to bowl every week. I lost interest in the end, and no one wanted to take it over, so it folded. I enjoyed it while it was happening, but since then I think I've maybe bowled once in nine years.

I've been struggling with depression for fourteen years. It's been a real up and down period. Even working here at Post Haste... For instance, I came into work one day, and I was fine coming in, but I got to work and broke down crying, for no reason at all. I don't know what caused it, or how it got to that point. But it does. It just tears you apart.

I'm currently being treated for that. The medication holds it, but the littlest things can still trigger it. Let's say I'm working on a laser machine

in the paper room, I'm feeding paper through, and one of the guys comes down and says, 'Look, you've got to do something about that paper.' Now, if you're feeling low enough, that can trigger the depression to get out of control, and all of a sudden you're gone. Unable to work, it gets that bad. On previous occasions with my depression I've lost a week. Once I lost a fortnight, totally. I haven't lost that kind of time this year.

This place, and Phoenix as a whole, has changed my life totally around.

The thing I like best about working at Post Haste is the social interaction. I'm not a loner at work. My work is very important to me. If I don't have work, I don't have a life – it's as simple as that. It's doing something all day long that I know I can do. They tell me here I've got the skills to be able to move to open employment if I wanted to, but I don't want to go back in that direction. Here I've got a guaranteed job for as long as I need it. At this stage I'm quite happy to continue as I am here at Post Haste. I'm quite satisfied with my current level, though I've also expressed interest in advancing my skills, and in taking on more responsibility.

I have no doubt I'll get bored again in the future, and when that happens I'll have to face that, and look at my options then. But at the moment, I'm quite satisfied. ■

SNAPSHOT Post Haste

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ESTABLISHED 1989

Post Haste is a wholly owned division of the Phoenix Society in South Australia. As a commercial entity Post Haste undertakes a range of media management offerings from mail collection to digital printing, personalised cross-media customer conversations, and database management. Employing 15 staff and 11 high level disability clients, Post Haste is the second largest mailing bureau in South Australia, and has developed in-house cutting-edge data management technology.

Priding themselves on a sense of mateship and co-ownership, all staff engage in working together activities.

Troy Stone

EQUITY LABOUR SERVICES

I was born in Queenstown, down the West Coast, youngest of three. But the neighbourhood that we used to live in wasn't the best, and it went from bad to worse, and my parents moved us to Shorewell Park back of Burnie, and then we ended up in Tewkesbury where my dad got work for a while helping a bloke on a farm.



I found school very tough. I pretty much failed every year at school. I only got the lowest grade you could get, just so they could pass me through to the next year. I basically failed year 12. I had a slow-learning problem and ADHD, and when that kicked in, it just didn't help me at all. I've had that all me life, still get it every now and then. ADHD is a hyperactive disorder that you have through most of your life. Sometimes it fades out as you get older, and with me it hasn't. It might still fade out years later down the track.

I was seventeen when I got some work planting trees. Before that I never did much at all. I was just in a unit on my own, pension payment, nothing else. I got into it through my father-in-law. I started planting trees with him in gardens and with the pulp mill, planting pine trees and gum trees for them. With the tree-planting you get a box of trees of 250 and it all sits in a pack on your side, and you take a poogie, which is a tube, basically, and the tree slips down through that, and you push down a lever and the tree'll go down into the ground three or four inches. You lift the poogie up again and your tree's planted. You do about 17 boxes a day of 250 trees. It was hard work, but it was good pay. That didn't last too long, though. I got put off because I had an injury to my foot. It's a lot of walking all through up and down hills and that.

I was out of work for about four months and then I ended up coming here to Equity Labour Services. I found out about ELS through Dad. He went through ELS back when he wanted to get into farming, and he ended up going to a farm at Yolla. He was up there a long time – he's only just stopped because he's turned 62 now, and he's retired off the farm.

So I knocked on the door here and said what kind of jobs have you got for me? They set me up with a lady to get all my resumes and all that rubbish fixed up. There was a lot of paperwork. Once I actually got my foot in the door Harvey Gardner – my boss, my first boss that I've ever known really – got me started. He had me working on the

highway with other blokes, whipper-snipping the banks as you come off the verges of the highway down near the bridges and that. You whipper-snip those, and the verges in the middle of the highway. That was mostly around Devonport to Burnie.

I did that for about two or three years. Then I progressed from there to doing a lot more maintenance and mowing and stuff for Cradle Mountain Water, who control a lot of the Northwest regional water system for your drinking water and all that.

Me and my supervisor Peter Graauw maintain the gardens and the lawns and whatever needs doing on CMW land. About three years ago we started on the pipeline. They've got this pipeline that runs from Port Sorrel to Wynyard, and then there's another set that goes from Wynyard to Stanley and then we go from Stanley to Smithton. It's a very long pipeline, about three or four feet under the ground. What we do is maintain the ground above it, just sort of marking it out so you know exactly where it is, and mowing it all with the tractor, cleaning up trees, whatever else is on the pipeline, and marking the new pits and the guide-posts you've got to show where the pipeline goes.

Usually it's me and Peter on our own doing the pipeline – we get around that pretty quickly just by ourselves. But if things get behind for us we'll have two teams of people going around them – one starts down at one end and the other starts at the other end and we meet in the middle.

The work I do is just labour. We do a lot of landscaping, but I couldn't really classify myself as a landscape artist, just hired labour. What I like about it is it's a constant thing – it's never changing. You start at one end of the job, you work through the various stages, you get to the end. And then you start all over again. So it's a never-ending job from start to finish. Same with the pipeline. That goes for six to seven months of the year, and you finish that and you go straight back to the garden for the maintenance and landscaping. And then next year,

back on the pipeline for another six months. That's my routine. I hope we stay doing what we're doing. I like the steady pace, you know what you're doing. Nobody bothers you. And I like the gardening side of it.

With the ADHD anything can distract you. If someone's talking to you, the rustle from a leaf can be enough. I used to be on medication for it, but it's settled down a lot now. I can concentrate a lot more on me job now because I know what I've got to do. And anyway your concentration level is at a high when you're working around the gardens. Anything can go amiss so you've really got to concentrate on what you're doing. Going around with the mowers and that: they throw out on the sides, so you've got to make sure you're not on the wrong side of the mower. And with whipper-snippers, where you're throwing up rocks a lot of the time, if you're anywhere near gravel you've just got to skim it across the top of the gravel. A lot of the time you still get hit in the legs, but at least it's not the face.

I don't have much trouble concentrating now, I've been doing it so long. With the ADHD, it is a bit more of a challenge to get the grasp of things when you start something new. But as it continues on it's easier. My main supervisor is Peter Graauw now, sort of my mentor. We work together at CMW, and on whatever else comes up.

For me, the support that I get from him helps me get into the groove of things.

Like if I get asking questions, and it seems like a stupid question, he doesn't judge you.

I suppose I'd be a bit nervous working somewhere else. It all depends on the peoples' attitudes, and if I don't like the attitude of the boss – if he's a grumpy mongrel – well, that does put you off. But that's just the same with normal people.

Here at Equity Labour Services it's more like everyone accepts that people are different, and you just feel like part of the family.

Sometimes you see your workmates outside work. Sometimes we'll go out for a party of a weekend. Usually Friday night we'll stop in and have a beer with one another. If football's on we'll definitely have a beer then.

The money I earn is good, and I can't say that I've ever had to complain about money problems. Before I was working I was on a pension from the disability thing. I'm 28 now, and I've still got a small pension even though I'm working with ELS. It brings in just enough to make ends meet in winter. What I do is I build up all my money during summer so I can survive through winter. In summer I'd be working nearly fulltime, basically a fulltime casual. But winter is my quietest time of the year, because grass stops growing in winter, and they've got to keep their full-timers going. In winter I probably get a couple of days a week, doing anything that comes up, like the pulp mill, or something out by the side of the road if some bloke has a day off or gets sick.

Different jobs come up. Lately I've been doing some of the gardens at the old Wesley Vale mill. And I've been over at the pulp mill in Burnie, too. They're destroying it, pulling the place apart, and we're sorting out all the archives and all that, just sorting the paper and the steel and the plastic and putting it all in bins. It's a big job. You just chuck it all in these bins, and it all gets recycled again – that's a good thing, at least.

Another job we did was cleaning out all the old oil from underneath the engines on the big Toll ships, the ones that carry the containers from Tasmania to the mainland. Cleaning them out, hosing them out and getting all the oil that's leaked out of the engines. And also repainting

all the hand rails. That was a good job. Bit of a noisy job, while the engine's going. They run the engine to help pump the waste water out, so you have to wear a pair of ear muffs and a pair of earplugs while you're cleaning it. It was a very warm job, too, with the engine's running the whole time.

There's a lot of other things I can do during the winter. If I'm not here at work, there's things that I can take the kids to, stuff like that. I can always occupy myself with something. I used to do a lot of bike riding when I was younger. I used to ride up to 126 kms a day. I was living in Yolla, and I'd ride to Penguin and back, just on a normal old mountain bike. I never did any racing, but I should have done. I don't ride much now. Most of my time I spend with my family, getting my kids ready for school and the rest of it. I've got three kids. One's just turned six, the other one's four, and the other one's turned two. I live with my partner and my kids here in Ulverstone.

I like being a father, it's good. It's all I expected.

Hard work, all the hard work pays off in the end. Sometimes sleepless nights are hard when you're doing physical work, but you do get used to it.

If I could take back the years where I stuffed up in school and couldn't concentrate I wouldn't trade them for anything.

If I could go back and give myself some advice I'd say: Do a lot better than I did at school. Really concentrate on what you're doing in school. If you don't know an answer to something ask the teacher. Because I had no idea what I was doing.

For a start, my attention span was basically nil. The disability I have was a lot stronger back then, but I didn't find out what was wrong with me until grade 10. My doctor diagnosed it. Should have been

diagnosed long before that. After that I got some special help at school, but by then it didn't really help much. What helped was that I understood there was something wrong. The problem wasn't that I couldn't be bothered. It was just that I couldn't understand what I was meant to be doing, couldn't get it explained to me properly. So that's where I got stranded.

What I do now is all self-taught, it's what I learnt from doing things myself. And that means a lot more to me than what I did at school.

When my sister's boyfriend came over from the mainland, he wanted to start up a landscaping gardening and home maintenance business, so I helped him out with the landscaping stuff. Some of the weeds that he didn't know, that weren't over on the mainland, I was able to help him with that, identifying plants and weeds and the best way to get rid of them out of the gardens without destroying the plants that are there. So that's good to be able to help people with the experience I've got.

And I can understand a lot more now than I could back at school. I've got two certificates in horticulture and I've got certificates for Cradle Mountain Water's safety stuff. I've also done 'Stop-Slow Bat' course for traffic control, and a few other things.

The more you get up your sleeve, the more confidence you have in what you do.

I've been thinking I'd like to get a truck licence. It would help here. And a chainsaw licence. It does help here as well. Anything I can get up my sleeve that helps the place I'm working at, it's just more opportunities for me, and more opportunities for them to use me for what I can do.

What work means to me is that it's somewhere where I belong.

This is another family to me that I can help by learning through my experiences. And it helps me reach more confidence inside myself that I can go out into the world and give all the experience I've got to other people, and teach them things, and help to get the ball rolling in their court.

Knowing that I've done a good job is a good feeling. The guy that we contract to might come up and say, 'you've done a good job here, and we'd like to see more work from you,' and stuff like that. But just seeing the result afterwards, compared to what it used to look like before we started, that makes a big difference. When we've cleaned something up, and it looks much better, I get real satisfaction out of that. ■

SNAPSHOT

Equity Labour Services

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ESTABLISHED 1999

As a division of WISE Employment, Equity Labour Services is a vegetation management, litter collection and cleaning business that trains and provides employment opportunities for people living with a range of disabilities. The 40 staff of Equity Labour Services are employed on either a full-time and casual basis and they are supported by a team of supervisors who provide training and on-site guidance.

Atong Joseph

THE SOCIAL STUDIO

I'm from the Sudan, in Africa. I came out to Australia with my family in 2004. I have a family of seven. I'm 19, the oldest – I have four brothers, and two sisters. We lived in Nairobi, in Kenya, for two years before we came here.



Basically the main reason we came to Australia is our parents wanted us to have a good education – better options, a better life. I still have family in Sudan. We are in contact with a couple of them. But some of them we don't even know where they are.

When I first arrived I didn't know English, so the Migrant Information Centre told us about the Blackburn English Language School. I think I went there for a year and a half, I can't really remember. I was just a kid then! But I picked English up pretty quickly. It wasn't that hard.

My dad already knew how to speak English, the only one in my family.

He was a teacher back in Sudan. He taught English and everything so he was already very educated. He just stopped working for a bit now, because he's kind of sick. But I think he'll start work again soon when he gets better.

I went to Maroondah Secondary College after that, and I just finished Year 12 last year. I did pretty well.

I did my school work experience at Coles, but this is my first real job. I found out about The Social Studio through a friend of mine, Dure, who works at the Migrant Information Centre. She knew how much I loved fashion. I was always talking to her about it... She saw this flyer on the internet, all about the Social Studio, what The Social Studio is about, and how the people working here have so much passion and love for fashion, and she thought: Oh, this is the perfect place for Atong to be! She told me about it and said she'd take me.

She brought me here herself. On the first day I met Grace and Anna, and they were like 'come on, yeah, come on and join.' I remember Anna

was cutting up a piece for a pattern. It was for the winter collection, I think, something like that. And I was like, 'Oh, this looks nice!' She was like: 'Alright, come and help me.' And we basically just cut materials and talked for a bit. And we started to form a very nice relationship.

I started out volunteering, helping with fashion shows, sewing pieces, and modelling as well. It was great experience for me. I did design and technology at school; in Year 12 I did Visual Communication and Studio Arts, and I did a bit of work experience for those.

And I've always done lots of stuff at home, making lots of clothes for myself, and for my friends. I've done things for my little sister, little dresses for her. I've made her scarf. Basically I basically do whatever she wants. She always says: 'Can you please make it for me?' But I'd done no proper work experience in fashion before coming here.

I was very happy with what I was doing at The Social Studio, so I decided I wanted to continue with it.

I was still doing Year 12 when I first started, but I came in as much as I could. I'd do my homework on Friday night so I could come here on Saturday and Sunday, usually from ten in the morning to six at night.

At first I pretty much just went crazy working. You take a pattern or a sample, and then you can choose your own colours, and make something that's your own design from that. The first piece I made and sold through the shop here was a black dress with lots of gold stuff on it. I used the basic pattern, to show me the shape of the size of the dress, and then I kind of changed it into my own style. You can get more courageous. It felt really good to sell the first piece. Really good.

I would have made ten, fifteen, maybe twenty pieces when I started. I did a lot of fancy, drapey stuff. Like a drapey gorgeous scarf that you can wear as a shirt as well – but you'd have to wear something else with it. I did that one in twenty minutes. But on the label I might put that it took longer than that!

We talk together at the shop to decide what price things should be. It depends on the fabric, too. It sort of works like an art gallery. If you design something, you get half the sticker price. Most of the stuff I've designed is already sold. I'd love to see someone wearing something I'd made walking down the street, but I haven't yet.

I've got a part-time job here now, on Wednesdays and Saturday.

Basically I just do whatever they want me to do. Mostly it's working out the front in the shop. But there's other things. At Christmas last year these people ordered lots of bags, and so I was working on that for a couple of weeks, designing bags and stuff. You take a pattern and do your own thing with it.

I still do my own pieces, but I'm not doing as much lately, because I'm busy studying. I got into fashion at RMIT Brunswick, which is really nice. I'm doing a diploma in applied fashion and design. I've got one day off, so I come here on Wednesday and then on Saturdays I work at The Social Studio Pop-Up Shop in Melbourne Central. The people here helped me get that job, too.

On Wednesdays I go into The Social Studio early so I can do my own stuff there on the machines, just sew and work.

All of the stuff I design I make here. Most of the time when I'm working at The Social Studio I'm just sitting at a sewing machine. I love it.

We talk at lunchtime, or when someone comes in. So its not just sitting at the machine, you can talk.

You can do lots of things when you're sewing. But me, I tend to just sit there and sew so I can concentrate.

I can do that for hours without getting bored because I'm looking forward to success after the garment is finished. I like to feel satisfied about it. That's why I tend to concentrate so hard on it, so that I can be satisfied afterwards.

Sometimes other people will say they like it, but I might not like it; other times there's a piece that someone goes, blah! but I think it's perfect! I designed it, so I think it's perfect! It's nice just being there with other people around, working. A lot of people here come from far away. One of my best friends here comes all the way from Bendigo. I live in Heathmont, which isn't that far but it still takes quite a while.

The Social Studio is very cultural, it's very open and fun. Everything about this place is very artistic and it's very unique as well. If you go to Adelaide or Sydney, you don't find anything like The Social Studio. Each year we do different collections. We start with a big group meeting, with our two teachers, Sarah and Anna, and all these young designers coming together. Each show has a theme. All the people work together to work out what it is going to be about.

We talk about our ideas, and start drawing, and we choose colours. Like for the summer collection last year it was all about draping, drapiness of the dresses. The pants, the tops, everything was drapey. And then the colours as well, we wanted to make it very summery, very colourful and that's what we did. Then from there we will choose the designs. We all draw, draw, draw, and then decide: yes, that's nice,

that's nice. If a design needs improvement, we'll do the improvement, and then that's it – we make the patterns and then on we go and make the clothes.

This year's winter collection is almost finished. It's going to be great, it's amazing, lots of minds and knowledge going into it. There's a lot of designers here now, so we all get to put one garment into the collection. I have a jacket in the winter collection, a mini-jacket. I just saw it finished, and it looked great. I'll be modelling for the show, too.

I only just learnt how to use patterns. What I do at home is just basically I measure myself and cut. I don't do patterns! Even at school when they told me to do assignments, I didn't do patterns, I'd just go ahead and do it while everyone else is doing patterns. I tried to avoid patterns, but now at RMIT we're learning how to do patterns, so they've followed me! I can't avoid them now. Because in Africa most of the clothes are not done with patterns. You just cut them up, and they're done.

I love African fabrics. It's not hard to get them here. I know my way around... I can just tell my aunties what I'm looking for.

And there are shops I go to in Dandenong and in Footscray. I've just learned how to dye fabric as well. It's really interesting. Before I couldn't do it, had no idea how to do that until I came here.

The RMIT course is four years. It's full-on at the moment. We're doing a lot of patterns. And we have drawing class. Production class is my favourite so far because basically you just get to sew.

I applied for a scholarship, but sadly I didn't get it. It's not too bad, though. I need to work, but not too much. Sometimes I do some modelling for an agency. My cousin does modelling for them as well...

It was just something that me and my friends decided to do. We do it maybe once a month, it depends what kind of shows are on. The last show I did was in Melton, and it had all these animals in it. They had, like, cows and sheep everywhere.... We did one in Morwell as well, a photo shoot. I'm signing up with a different agency now. They're helping me with my portfolio.

I like modelling, it's nice. You feel a bit sore afterwards, because you've been in heels all day. But you get to meet your favourite designers. You get to wear your favourite designers' clothes. And also, I'd never actually thought of it before, but there's something else about modelling that I really like: when someone's showing your clothes, you want them to do it perfectly, so it's good to know how to do it yourself.

I'll be able to be a good role model for the people who are going to be modelling my clothes one day.

My favourite designers are all African designers working in Australia. They do very, very nice stuff. They have a lot of African influence in it and that's really nice. I also like Australian designers as well. Like Ruby Rose – she does collections of stuff now. It's awesome! I think somebody else actually designs the things. I take a lot of inspiration from other designers. But even when I like them, when I think what they're doing is good, I reckon I can do better!

I don't want to end up working for someone else. I mean, if I get an opportunity that's great, but I really want to be a designer, and actually get to design my own collections. After I finish my course, probably to start off I'll work with some other people to get some good experience, and then I'd love to have my own clothing line and have my own shop, a shop I can put all my hard work into, and my own fashion.

My style is African-Australian. Of course, one day I'd like to go back to Sudan, but not to live. I'm going to live here. But actually I've been thinking lately that, in the future, I would like to go to Sudan, and maybe find a partner to work with and open a shop with there. So that the people there can experience influences from other cultures. In Africa you're not allowed to wear short things, everything's long to cover the legs. But they have very beautiful fabrics.

I'd like to work in African-style fabrics and Australian style, and put it together, and create really beautiful stuff. ■

SNAPSHOT

The Social Studio

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ESTABLISHED 2009

The Social Studio provides a dynamic space where clothing is created from the style and skills of the young refugee community. Transforming recycled and excess manufacturing materials into original design, the enterprise provides a retail outlet for designers to showcase and sell their range.

Through training in Certificate III in Clothing Production and weekend social sewing groups, The Social Studio has engaged 30 young refugees to deliver pathways into training and employment opportunities in fashion and hospitality – through an African themed café which is managed by one of the trainees.

The business is supported by three staff members and a network of fashion and business entities.

ABOUT

Social Traders

T: 03 8319 8444

W: SOCIALTRADERS.COM.AU

Social Traders works with, and invests in, viable social enterprises. We provide them with expertise and resources to access markets and to grow. We champion the power of successful social enterprise to contribute to the nation through increasing confidence, opportunity and income.

Social Traders was established in 2008 as a specialist social enterprise development organisation. Working with Government, community, business and research partners, we aim to:

- Raise awareness about social enterprise and demonstrate its benefits
- Open up markets for social enterprise products and services
- Increase finance available to start and develop social enterprises
- Build capacity of social enterprise to trade successfully
- Support the coordination of social enterprise development in Australia.

ABOUT

Jobs Australia

T: 1800 331 915

W: JA.COM.AU

Jobs Australia is the national peak body for non-profit organisations assisting unemployed people to get and keep jobs. Funded and owned by members, who range from large charitable organisations to small local community based agencies, we provide an independent voice for disadvantaged unemployed people and the organisations that support them.

Our mission is to contribute to a fairer and more equitable Australia by:

- Strengthening the capacity of our members, and of the communities and individuals they serve
- Promoting better understanding of the needs and interests of disadvantaged unemployed people
- Developing and contributing to policy and programs that result in sustainable employment opportunities for unemployed and disadvantaged people and communities.

Resources

ONLINE RESOURCES

Social Enterprise Builder: an online guide to assist those interested in building a social enterprise through a seven stage business planning process

w: socialtraders.com.au/builder/logon

Social enterprise case studies

w: socialtraders.com.au/library/social-enterprise-case-studies

Social Enterprise Finder: a directory of Australian social enterprises

w: socialenterprisefinder.com.au

Finding Australia's Social Enterprise Sector (FASES)

w: socialtraders.com.au/finding-australias-social-enterprise-sector-fases

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