

Symon Still - Injury Prevention Manager**Where there's a will there's a way!**

Nineteen years ago, one careless moment changed Symon Still from a keen triathlete to a partial quadriplegic.

Now, practical support from EDGE is helping him achieve his goal to stay in the workforce as long as he can, while he tries to stop others from suffering spinal cord injuries. In 1994, the then 24 year old Physical Education teacher was riding his bike to work, when he collided with a car.

"I was inattentive, so was he, but he was in a four wheel drive," says Symon - the result was devastating.

"I sustained high level spinal cord injury, I'm classified as a partial quadriplegic, so I can use my arms but they're sort of numb."

His ability to walk was gone, but Symon's will to work is still the same. He adapted, going on to teach mathematics and later moving to the Paraplegic Benefit Fund as its Injury Prevention Manager. Symon is now able to combine his professional and life experience.

"My role here is to find, recruit, train and mentor new presenters to share their story to audiences," he tells INSIDE EDGE.

Symon's team members have all suffered spinal cord injuries.

They tell their stories to children, teenagers, employers and workers in sectors as varied as mining, marine and construction.

May Bowden, General Manager of the Paraplegic Benefit Fund, says the education programmes that Symon oversees are having a positive effect.

"Many individuals who have been to our presentations have commented that PBF's Injury Prevention presentation has made them re-think their own safety behaviours and the impact it could have on family and friends."

Symon tells INSIDE EDGE, "We're there to make people think about their own decisions. A lot of people come up afterwards and say I've made some unwise choices in my life up until now, but as of today I'm changing."

While he loves his job, spreading that message can be physically exhausting for Symon. "It's the in and out of the car and pushing, that'll wear out my shoulders. I don't want to lose the ability to transfer (from the car to a wheelchair), cause if I lose my ability to transfer, I lose my independence."

"There are many people who work for PBF who have enormous passion," says May Bowden, "Their bodies let them down."

"I think with EDGE's help we can find opportunities - not only in terms of finding employment but also making it easier for individuals to concentrate on being passionate and loyal employees."

As Symon's role at PBF has evolved, so have the physical demands of his job. EDGE Occupational Therapist Sarah DiTommaso identified that the continual lifting of a heavy wheelchair was putting Symon's body under unnecessary strain so, eight years ago, she successfully applied to Job Access for funds to purchase a lighter chair.

A year later, a managerial promotion meant more desk work for Symon and the need for adjustment in the backrest support of his chair. An increase in computer work meant voice-activated software was necessary to prevent repetitive strain on Symon's arms. Through EDGE, Job Access funded a new backrest and the software to enable Symon to write on a computer by speaking rather than typing. These seemingly small changes have made a huge difference to Symon, but he would never have been able to afford them on his own. EDGE managed to source it all - it didn't cost Symon or his employer a cent.

At 44 "wear and tear" is taking its toll on Symon's body. So EDGE recently helped source an electric wheelchair and the necessary vehicle modifications to transport it.

This means that the father of two can continue to participate in the workforce, helping to provide the education to stop spinal injuries like his. He hopes his story will help. "Others will see this and think right, equipment can make all the difference!"

"With an open mind, looking at people for their individual needs, people can work and therefore enjoy their life!" he says.

Hospital career takes off!

With EDGE's support, Ben Urban's career has undergone an "extreme makeover".

It took study, hard work and support from EDGE, but last year Ben finally qualified as an Anaesthetic Technician and is currently employed at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital.

When patients undergo procedures ranging from spinal blocks for epidurals to major surgery, Ben is often part of the operating theatre team.

"My role is to assist the anaesthetist with airwaves, monitoring the patient, with ECG, blood pressure cuff and setting up drips for the patient," he tells INSIDE EDGE.



Ben Urban - Anaesthetic Technician.

It's quite a change from the role of hospital orderly - a position Ben held for eight and a half years.

Ben kept thinking - "This has been a really cool job. I'm doing this to help people. This is something that I want to do."

He continued to work as a hospital orderly for quite a few years. Ben then moved to the Intensive Care Unit as an orderly and was there for 6 years. But, over time, Ben realized he needed a new challenge. He kept hearing about the anaesthetic technician job.

"It was on my radar and this was something I thought I could do, but I just kept procrastinating" he says.

The prospect of doing more study was very daunting for Ben. He wasn't sure that he could go back to study and was worried that the course would take him a long time to complete. That is, until his EDGE Job Coordinator stepped in to help.

"EDGE was assisting me with the studies, just to help me get through that side of things. If I had any issues, or had troubles with work, they were always there to back me up," says Ben.

After one false start, Ben continued to work full time, while studying part time.

"I wanted to challenge myself. I felt like I had nothing to lose," he says. "I really pushed myself to study hard. It wasn't an easy time."

Eventually, all that effort paid off when Ben secured a second year trainee position at Royal Perth Hospital. Later, after successfully completing his studies, he was offered a position at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital.

"I am very proud of myself. Three years ago, I didn't think I'd be where I am now," he says.

EDGE Job Coordinator Lisa Johnson says, "Ben's incredible self discipline and perseverance helped him to achieve his dream. He is a delight to support and a genuine down-to-earth Mr Nice Guy!"

Ben laughs off the compliment. "Oh, I agree completely!" he jokes.

SO what's Ben's next ambition? To gain confidence in his new job.

"I only qualified in November - I still feel like I'm the rookie!" he says. "My challenge now is to come to work and feel totally comfortable."

Mark Kosowitz - IT Trainee**Focus on the person not the disability.**

Therapy Focus not only works to provide therapy and support to WA children with disability, when it comes to recruiting staff the company also actively seeks to integrate people with disability.

"Anyway," says Iain Humphreys, Therapy Focus' Information Technology Coordinator.

"The fact of the matter is, we don't employ people because of the disability, we employ people because we look through the disability to the person."

For 25 year old Mark Kosowitz, that forward thinking led to his appointment as a full-time, IT Trainee. Therapy Focus could clearly see Mark's talents in computing.

Mark's duties include setting up laptops, establishing "hot desks" (where staff share one work-station), formatting computers, data entry and research. It's a natural fit for someone who's been using computers all his life. Mark says he really enjoys work now, but it's the company that makes it special.

"They have the kind of culture where everyone gets along," he says simply.

"It makes me feel really good and my parents are happy with me, they've stopped nagging me to get a job!"

But, according to EDGE Job Coordinator Luke Griffin, it was a technology failure on Mark's first day that helped to break the ice with his new colleagues.

"The building actually had a power cut for two hours and during that time, staff moved into the kitchen and just got talking. At some point someone started talking about a topic Mark was interested in and he was able to start building up a rapport from an early stage," he says.

Luke's seen a real improvement in Mark's self confidence and credits Therapy Focus.

"Work's really making great progress and as you understand, he's got such a supportive workplace. They're absolutely brilliant! They'd contact me if they need any further assistance, but they really are making it work themselves."

Iain Humphreys is quick to point out that Mark has been a valuable addition to the Therapy Focus team.

"Mark hasn't brought anything to the department that's advanced it because of his disability, what's advanced it is his work ethic," he says.

"If I brought in an 18 year old off the street who, for all intents and purposes, does not have a disability, it would be a lot harder to manage than someone who has a disability like Mark."

"With Mark, and with the support we get from EDGE, we can manage extremely easily. It's just a matter of training us - as his supervisors and co-workers - to take Mark's disability into account when we need to, and to know when not to take it into account, if that makes sense."

Makes a lot of sense, doesn't it?



Gareth Hudson - Patient Companion Officer.

His feet are firmly on the 'ladder of aspiration'!

From the time he arrived in the world, weighing roughly half as much as his twin brother, Gareth Hudson has been a fighter.

Born with a neural tube defect which led to a mild intellectual disability, his first doctors weren't optimistic about Gareth's future. Clearly they hadn't factored in the Hudson determination!

Now 35, Gareth has his feet firmly on life's "ladder of aspiration."

While many people complain about having to work one job, Gareth happily has two. He's pursuing further qualifications to allow him to progress professionally. And he's saving his money to afford a home closer to the coast, to allow him to indulge his hobby of surfing.

"I want to move up and I want to move to a better suburb and closer to the beach!" he tells INSIDE EDGE.

Four mornings a week, Gareth works as a Patient Companion Officer at Royal Perth Hospital. Elvira Gibson, Nurse Manager, Corporate Nursing, says it's an important job.

"The Patient Companion Officer's role is to make sure patients stay on the ward. If patients try to pull their lines out, Gareth plays a part, he rings a bell to get the nurse to come. Sometimes he helps the nurses with patient care. It's another set of hands."

"He's doing fine!"

According to EDGE Job Coordinator, Francis Ryle, the feedback from Gareth's other colleagues has also been very positive. His reliable and responsible attitude to work is really appreciated.

"They say he's a good guy to have on board."

Gareth admits he enjoys working.

"It's important for self esteem and just to be doing something and getting your mind working," he says. "It makes you feel a lot more positive about yourself."

After finishing his shift at the hospital, Gareth goes to a second job cleaning and stacking weights at a Perth gym.

But he hopes both of his current positions are just "stepping stones" to his dream position - as a nursing assistant. So far, he mightn't have passed the required literacy test, but Gareth says he's determined to keep trying until he does.

Maree Hudson has no doubt her son can achieve pretty much anything he sets his mind to.

"It took a long time for him to ride a bike, it took a long time for him to drive a car, (but) he got there!" she says.

"EDGE have been good, they've found him a job. He does rely on them, they're there, backing him up, giving him that security."

Chris Madson - I'm one of the lucky ones!

After many years of dealing with mental health issues, the opportunity to help others proved a turning point for Chris Madson.

"One of the ladies at a hostel asked if I wanted to do some shopping with her," says Chris "so I went and did the shopping!"

"I still believe it was the start of my recovery journey - in the sense that, someone actually believed I could do something."

For Chris, being trusted with the responsibility for that seemingly simple task had a positive effect on his own mental health.

"I was pretty nervous at the time but, when I look back on it, there was just something in me that was telling me to believe in myself again," Chris tells INSIDE EDGE. "I ended up doing the banking, taking people to appointments and stuff like that."

Over time, his health improved as his confidence grew. Two years ago, with EDGE's support, Chris was appointed a Peer Support Worker at Richmond Fellowship, a non-government, not for profit organisation providing psycho-holistic support.

"All the experience I've got since I was diagnosed. I'm now employed putting all that experience into helping people with mental health issues. Pretty cool hey?" says Chris.

Wanda Davies, a Team Leader at Richmond Fellowship, explains that Peer Support Workers use their "lived experience" with their own mental health issues to help clients.

"I think what people like about peer support is, not only do staff have the education, but they (also) have the experience and that really sits well with a lot of people as staff go out into the community and assist people," says Ms Davies.

"They want someone who knows what they're talking about."

"I couldn't think of a better place to start," says 36 year old Chris. "I'd never worked in an office before this job, that's been a big step for me."

As well as working with Richmond Fellowship, Chris also gives talks to other people with mental health issues and is involved with support groups. Helping others has also helped his mental health.

"When I help people get through their tough times, I can reflect back on what they're doing and look at myself as well.

People notice I'm getting better. This is really good for me," he says.

Chris believes he's one of the lucky ones - he's had ongoing support from a loving family. He also credits EDGE Job Coordinator, Rebecca Turpin.

"People think because they're a Job Coordinator all they're talking about is the job, but Rebecca and I have coffee once every three weeks or so and we talk about everything from work to my social life. It's really good to have that extra support."

Rebecca Turpin responds. "To have Chris use his experience to offer hope to others who are on their own recovery journey, not only helps them but also develops and provides new opportunities for Chris on a professional and personal front. His confidence has grown enormously since his appointment to the organization and his role is an important part of the range of services that Richmond Fellowship offers to the wider community."



Deb Miley with Vicki Moir from EDGE.

Deb Miley - Administration**Life is Good!**

Deb Miley can't remember the day she married her husband Mark, 35 years ago. Neither can she remember the births of either of her daughters Jasmin or Vynka.

A traffic accident five years ago not only stole Deb's memory from the time she was 19, it almost cost her life. A simple car trip to the shops had catastrophic consequences when Deb's vehicle was involved in a collision.

"I don't remember a thing, but I apparently took on a bus," she says.

"I had broken ribs, a collapsed lung and two fractures in my pelvis."

Initially in a coma, Deb also suffered a brain injury and spent two weeks receiving critical care in Royal Perth Hospital. On Valentine's Day 2008, she was moved to the hospital's Shenton Park Rehabilitation Centre. Deb didn't leave until May.

"I had to learn to walk, talk and live again," Deb tells INSIDE EDGE.

But perseverance and patience have paid off. Despite her disability, the former receptionist was keen to get back into the workforce.

With encouragement and assistance from EDGE, Deb started helping out in administration at Southern Cross Care - an organisation offering support and respite care throughout the community.

"Deb came in as a volunteer. Deb's work on the projects we gave her convinced us that we should take her on as a staff member," says Charlene Fernandez, Southern Cross Care's Manager of Client Services.

Now working on a permanent, part-time basis, Deb's role is varied. Tasks range from stock control - both ordering and maintaining supplies, to logging time sheets and other data entry responsibilities.

"Deb's learnt our computer system really well," says Charlene "She's really brilliant!"

EDGE Job Coordinator, Vicki Moir, has been crucial in helping Deb to master her new role by breaking tasks down and practicing them with her.

"Initially Deb was very daunted by computer programmes, but it was just a case of learning the steps. You click here, then click here. We write that down for Deb and then make sure she's following those steps," says Vicki.

Charlene Fernandez was so impressed with EDGE's training and support that she adopted similar processes to instruct all new staff.

Charlene believes the collaboration has been a win-win.

"The big thing about Deb is that she's got such a lovely personality and such a wicked sense of humour that she's very well loved within the team."

When Fate dealt Deb another cruel hand - this time, a brain aneurism diagnosed two years ago, her stoicism kicked in again. Despite suffering debilitating headaches, she hasn't taken any time off work.

"I just cope with things," she tells INSIDE EDGE. "If I have a headache, I just live with it."

"Deb's example is proof that life can continue after an accident or a disability, particularly with an acquired brain injury," says EDGE's Vicki Moir. Deb Miley's next challenge is to requalify to drive.

"One day I hope to," she says. "The biggest thing is just getting my confidence back."

But she's not in a hurry. Deb Miley's fortunate - and she knows it.

"I thank my lucky stars every single day that I'm here - life's very good."

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