

Hannah de Boer's five star job!

It might "take a village to raise a child" but sometimes it also takes a community working together, to find them a job.

That was certainly the case for eighteen year old Hannah de Boer. Several months ago, Hannah had never even been inside a five-star hotel. These days, she is thrilled to be employed by one of Perth's finest - the Pan Pacific Perth.

Hannah's tale is one of collaboration - between a shy but motivated jobseeker, EDGE, committed to securing a job that met her employment aspirations, a Registered Training Organisation to teach Hannah the necessary skills and an employer that gave her an opportunity to prove herself in the workplace.

EDGE Job Co-ordinator Sabine Bennett, said that when a traineeship with one company didn't eventuate, she and Hannah started looking for other options.

"Hannah said that working in Hospitality was something she'd love. We started researching and found Empyrean."

Empyrean Education Institute is an award-winning, Registered Training Organisation specialising in Hospitality and Business. With the support of Training Manager Stacy Shoemark, Hannah was enrolled in a 19-week, Certificate 3 course in Hospitality. Hannah's enthusiasm and drive was recognised when she was awarded "Student of the Month" just two months into the course.



Sabine Bennett with Hannah de Boer.

"I'm a really big advocate for people with disabilities and a really big advocate for EDGE," said Stacy.

"At Empyrean, our class groups are mixed - different backgrounds, different cultures."

"I've found that by having that diversity - and not separating the students with disabilities - it they get their confidence up, they know they CAN do things. And, actually, they teach the other students a lesson in life."

When Hannah was close to finishing the course, Gordon Rendall, EDGE Employer Consultant, approached the Pan Pacific Perth about Hannah doing the work experience she needed in order to complete her training.

"We had a meeting with the Human Capital and Development Team, Joanna Martin & Peter Knight, to introduce Hannah." Gordon told INSIDE EDGE. With support from EDGE and training from Empyrean, Pan Pacific Perth agreed to a work experience placement for Hannah.

Hannah admits, at first, she was a little overawed by the five-star surroundings.

"When I first saw it, I was thinking - Oh man, I never saw myself working here!"

But working is exactly what she does now. "Work experience" led to Hannah being offered a paid job as one of the Pan Pacific Perth's Food and Beverage Attendants. Duties include setting up for banquets, serving drinks and food, dealing with customers - even making a mean cappuccino!

"I feel great. I feel really excited, I feel really, really happy!" she said. "I'm working in a hotel! It's pretty special."

This successful collaboration between all parties has led to a huge lift in Hannah's self-esteem.

And the training provided by Empyrean and the Pan Pacific Perth has given Hannah even greater confidence in her ability to learn.

"And it's given her a career." says Sabine.

A mother's story . . .

When I was a teenager, my big intention was to go to university and become a lawyer. Instead, twenty years after I left school, I still work in a supermarket. My husband's a concreter - neither of us graduated from high school. In fact, no-one in our family has. We realise how hard it is to get gainful employment when you've dropped out of school.

My mission for our eldest son Jayden, was to keep him in school until he finished year 12. Jayden was first diagnosed with ADHD and learning difficulties when he was 6. Because I fought tooth and nail not to put him on medication, he fell further behind at school every year that I said no.

Jayden struggled academically but was great with his hands. He wanted to leave school and get an apprenticeship, I figured he needed year 11 and 12 to try and stay abreast of the paperwork side of things and to mature a little bit. I thought I was doing the right thing. By the time Jayden was in year 11, he was on antidepressants because he was suicidal.

Then Braden Langley from EDGE, suggested we consider moving Jayden to the Australian Trades College. My answer? "Not a chance in hell!"

It was like pushing the proverbial up the hill, he knew he had a battle ahead. And even the teachers at Jayden's old high school said "if you can get Joanne to agree to this, God help you" cause they knew I was going to be standing firm.

But once I realised that they do graduate from high school, as well as completing a pre-apprenticeship, I changed my mind. I hadn't known anything like that existed. I had no idea.

I was stoked. There were times there I couldn't contain my excitement, I was hopping around and I was crying with relief that there was something out there for him. That he wasn't just going to slip through the cracks.

After moving Jayden to the Australian Trades College, we saw a difference in him immediately. He buckled down, put his head down, his bum up and got stuck into it. He got a lot more confident, he had teachers feeding back that he was doing the right thing. He knew all along he could do it, but when he got that feedback, that's when his confidence started to soar! The last eight months of year 12, Jayden went from only just scraping through to passing really well.

Braden from EDGE would go to the ATC and see Jayden, make sure he had everything he needed, give him a bit of a boost and a bit of a boot sometimes when he needed, just remind him he's been given an opportunity not a lot of kids are given so don't throw it away.

Jayden completed school, graduating from high school but also nine months ahead of his peers, having completed a pre-apprenticeship in light mechanics. He walked out of year 12, had a month off, and straight into an apprenticeship with City Holden.

I'm so appreciative to Braden for the hard work he put in - he even came to Jayden's graduation in his own time. He's been fantastic.

Jayden told me recently that he's happier now than ever before, he feels a real sense of worth and is grateful for the effort everyone has put in for him. We are so very proud.

Thanks to Braden and EDGE for making all this possible for our son. Had he not convinced us this would be the right move for Jayden, we may not be enjoying this time of his life as much as we are.

Jayden's future is endless - the world's his, now. We will always be thankful that you played an important part in this chapter of his life.

Thank you, Joanne.



A new member for the 'Hall of Fame'

On International Women's Day in March, a handful of remarkable West Australians were inducted into the local "Women's Hall of Fame."

Among them, the first female Chief Judge of the WA District Court, an eminent Professor of Education and the General Manager of the most successful radio station in Australia.

On the list that day was a telemarketer from Stirling, who, like the other nominees, has also contributed greatly to the community. Why was she included? Because, despite facing some big challenges, this woman has achieved something

many others take for granted - living a normal (and successful) life.

Linda Fistonich earned her place at that table of remarkable women through sheer determination - and her dogged refusal to understand the word "can't". She reacted to her award with her typical humility.

"I was kind of overwhelmed really, it was so unexpected," she told INSIDE EDGE.

Linda is blind and has severe hearing loss, yet she works on the phone in the busy headquarters of the W.A. Community Newspaper Group.

Despite an early lack of encouragement from her own teachers, she's a university graduate, having completed a degree in Psychology.

Linda's done volunteer work, helping migrants and the unemployed. As well, she's delivered many talks to children at schools.

Linda Fistonich "walks the talk", demonstrating that all that stands between people with disability and their dreams is determination.

"There's nothing that I really can't do except drive a car," she said.

"If I want something badly enough, be it a job or whatever, I believe that having a disability doesn't stop me from doing a lot of things."

Linda credits her family with instilling an unyielding self-belief.

"Coming from a Croatian background, my family are very determined and fierce, hardworking," she said. "They've never ever wanted me to give up so they were the only ones that really believed in me when I was little."

Linda's early teachers weren't so positive.

"I went to a school for the blind and if you weren't really, really clever or good at music or sports or something like that you were considered a nobody. They never praised me or said nice things about me," she said.

Moving into a mainstream college for high-school changed everything.

"I was the only blind student, but the nuns, the teachers and the girls were wonderful to me. I thought I was in a different world altogether - finally people loved me and accepted me and couldn't do enough for me!"

In the years since, Linda's delivered many talks at schools, trying to impress on children that people with disability are really no different.

"Living in 2012, a lot of people don't come in contact with disabled people," said Linda. "They don't know how we do things like tell the time or simple things & little children ask things like "how do you get dressed?"... and do I know anything about dreams or colours?"

For the past 18 years, Linda's been employed by WA's Community Newspaper Group - a job she loves.

EDGE acquired special computer equipment for Linda that reads text out loud to her. Another machine means everything she writes comes up in Braille first.

"I've got a lot of respect for Linda and I do think she's a role model for other women," said Anna MacMahon, EDGE Community Support Co-ordinator. "She's worked very hard her whole life and she is well respected around her office, she's independent."

Anna MacMahon acknowledged the efforts of the Community Newspaper Group.

"It's been fabulous the way they've accommodated Linda's needs and been open to identifying that there are different ways of doing a task - it doesn't matter how you get to that end point, just as long as you get to that end point. Community Newspapers have been very good at understanding that."

This month also notches up another important milestone for Linda Fistonich - turning 50 and looking forward to celebrating in style.

Linda's not content to simply let life "happen". Instead, she grabs life with both hands and makes the most of everything on offer.

Remarkable, indeed.



Craig Robb (Left) with Managing Director Sue Robertson and Executive Director Dr Greg Lewis.

Mr Craig Robb, proof nice guys can come first!

In front of an audience of almost 600 people, Craig was named the 2012 Disability Employment Support Worker of the Year. The prize, which included a certificate and \$2000, was made by dignitaries Malcolm McCusker, Governor of WA, and Disability Services Minister, Helen Morton.

A Job Co-ordinator with EDGE, Craig says he was "blown away" by the public acknowledgement of his work. He was thrilled to share the occasion with his wife Sylvia, their two children and his work friends.

"This was like the Brownlow Medal of awards," Craig told INSIDE EDGE "But you can't win a Brownlow without a good team. Without the guys I work with, there is no award."

Craig has worked for EDGE for the past 17 years. But how he came to work at EDGE is yet another success story in the life of Craig Robb.

Back in the 1980's he had been working as a bricklayer and "grano" worker in the construction industry. Eventually, keen for a change, he went back to study and graduated as an Industrial Paramedic.

But with the birth of his second child, Craig made a decision that'd change his life - and the lives of many others.

"I decided I wanted to use my brain, not my body for work" he says. Centrelink had other ideas, telling the new dad he was "more suited to physical work".

Obviously Centrelink underestimated Craig's determination - or as he calls it, stubbornness.

"As soon as someone says no, I have to prove them wrong!" he laughs.

Centrelink's loss was EDGE's gain, with Craig securing a job as a Co-ordinator in 1994. He's worked in various roles since then but for the past three years, Craig has been with EDGE's highly acclaimed school to work transition program for students with disability, the Supported Work Experience and Training Program.

The genial 51 year old says joining EDGE was "the best thing that ever happened to me."

"It gives you a better perspective on things" he says.

"If you can improve someone's life and I mean we know we're not the Messiah, but it's pretty good, isn't it?" "I don't even use the word disability - I see the word "ability."

EDGE Managing Director Susan Robertson says "Craig is an integral part of the culture of EDGE and his stories about the 300 people with disability he has supported over 16 years provide valuable lessons for new comers about what it means to live and breathe EDGE's vision & values and advocacy for the employment of people with disability and their right to receive the best support on the job."

"Craig has a wealth of knowledge to offer others. Craig has mentored many new staff, teaching them to see beyond an individual's barriers. He is always available to give new staff tips on how to overcome training "blocks" and to suggest another way of approaching a problem. More importantly he teaches others perseverance and a "can do" attitude. As a co-worker said "If there is another way to teach a skill, Craig will always find it!"

However, Susan Robertson believes it's in the area of building staff morale that Craig Robb really shines.

"He has an uncanny knack of challenging "doubters" and calling a "spade a spade" with considerable humour," she says.

"Everyone responds to his communication style."

"Craig has made a tremendous difference to the lives of the people he has supported and helped shape the wider community's perception of the valued role people with disability can make to WA's workforce."

Craig Robb spends his working life finding opportunities for students who might otherwise be denied the chance to try something new.

Seventeen years ago, EDGE did the same with him - seeing that there was potential in the bloke who'd once worked as a brickie.

It's been an excellent match - if not always a conventional one.

"I'm not your normal co-ordinator," Craig told INSIDE EDGE "I'm not good on the computer, I'm not on Facebook or Twitter. I just had a course on the Apple phone and I failed that!" he chortles.

The secret to his success?

"I just like to talk to people."

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