

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY GEORGE TALEPOROS
- PATHWAYS 2000 -

Title: Why I Still Call University Home: A Personal Account of the Past and a Vision for the Future for Post Secondary Education

I want to take you on a journey. This journey is one that I have been on for the last 23 years. It began in 1977 when I was diagnosed with Spinal Muscular Atrophy.

Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) is a disease of the anterior horn cells. Anterior horn cells are located in the spinal cord. SMA affects the voluntary muscles for activities such as walking, moving, breathing and swallowing. Sensation is not affected and neither is intelligence. In fact it is often observed that people with SMA are unusually bright and sociable (FSMA, 2000). This is an observation which I often like to quote because too often we describe disabilities exclusively with regard to their negative qualities. However, positive characteristics also emerge from disabilities. In fact, I think that the lack of disability can make children psychologically weak, codependant, unable to meet life's challenges and generally boring!

Like all journeys, events and circumstances along the way shape the remainder of the trip, nothing is more true to that than my diagnosis with SMA.

As a disabled child of the 1980s, I was channelled into the 'special school' system. The school was called Glen Waverley Special – a school for children with physical and multiple disabilities. It was a beautiful place, a brand new school, I'm sure you could still smell the paint drying and my mother was very impressed. It had speech therapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, hydrotherapy and even its own indoor pool. We had 'green ladies' to take us to the toilet and 'blue busses' to take us home.

While Glen Waverley Special had great facilities, there was an emerging consciousness that, some children with disabilities may benefit from spending time at a mainstream school and, as a result, the integration system was born.

In 1981, I became one of the first student's to be a part of Victoria's earliest integration programs. I would like to share with you an article that reported on this program. The article was titled: 'Special Day for Special Pupils'. It appeared in a local paper called 'The Waverley Gazette'. I came across the article several years ago in an old photo album. Although the report wrote glowingly about the integration program, reading it brought back memories of difficult times. Here is an excerpt:

"The integration teacher at the Special School Mrs Andrea Brien says her pupils love going to Brentwood. 'They really enjoy it, it is the highlight of their week.'"

For me, this statement could not have been further from the truth. I remember the fear and dread that would come over me the night before I had to go to Brentwood. At the time, I wasn't as able to intellectualise those feelings but today, it is evident to me that my struggles with the integration program were a result of poor planning and inadequate accommodation of my needs.

As the article states in passing:

“But there are things they find difficult to manage. For example, the steps around the school are just hopeless. We have to lift George, who is in a wheelchair, up them, although I believe the school is in the middle of putting in a submission for ramps.”

Due to the lack of physical access, I was taken out of my motorised chair and transferred into a manual chair so I could be carried into the school and as a result, my freedom and independence were taken away. I was not provided with a teacher's aide and was forced to stay indoors during lunch and recess breaks. In short, I was part of a program that had a very simplistic approach to integration. The program manager did not acknowledge that integration involves a lot more than taking a child from a special school and putting that child into a mainstream school. That person did not know what we take for granted today – integration requires a lot of work, planning ahead and spending money.

My primary years were not successful. My time in the mainstream school was erratic as I pleaded with my parents to let me stay at the special school where I felt safe. My negative experience of integration led me to feel like I was not able to succeed outside of the special school and I was content to spend my years with the other children with disabilities even though this meant that my education and life opportunities would be severely limited.

It was not until High School and the late 1980's that I realised that I could achieve in a mainstream school. It had nothing to do with what I had done; it was all to do with the emergence of structures to support me. Suddenly, I had an accessible physical environment, teacher's aides, and even a laptop computer to facilitate my progress. I developed confidence in my academic potential and this resulted in me believing that maybe I could perform well enough to achieve my High School Certificate and, if I really worked hard, I could scrape into University.

By year 11, my grades were good and I began shopping around for a university and a degree that appealed to my interests in Public Relations and the media. It was then that I discovered that it was more likely to be inaccessible institutions, rather than my grades, that would prevent me from getting into university. I approached a variety of institutions and was horrified to hear the same excuse repeated: “We're sorry, but the building that houses the course that you're interested in is very old and wasn't designed to accommodate people in wheelchairs.” This was in 1991, before the Disability Discrimination Act (1992), before Disability Action Plans and before Pathways.

Accessibility concerns rather than academic interests therefore dictated my tertiary preferences.

In 1993, I accepted a place in an Arts degree at Monash University on a campus that had reasonable physical access. The early days were difficult, especially the first day when the arrangement for toileting assistance and notetaking fell through. However, I gradually found myself feeling more at ease and capable of taking part in university life. I became involved in my university's disability advisory groups and saw things change: ramps were being built, lift buttons were being lowered, tactile surfaces were being laid, hearing loops were being installed, footpaths were being repaired, adaptive technology rooms were appearing and more disabled parking bays were being provided.

By my third year, I found myself in an environment that welcomed and supported me. My needs were being addressed and my impairment was being accommodated. As I neared the end of my degree, I began to consider graduate studies, as I wanted to continue to learn and achieve in my discipline – the social sciences and specifically psychology and sociology.

University had become a place where I could be myself and where I could reach the goals that I once never even dreamed of. It was a place where I could be around other people who wouldn't look down on me because of my disability but who saw my potential. I was transformed from a frightened 1st year student to a confident and ambitious PhD student who is considering his post-doctoral research options.

When I look back at what I have achieved at university, I realise that there were two factors that facilitated my success. Firstly, it was the support of my teachers and university staff who believed in fairness, equal access and doing something to facilitate inclusion and change. I believe the second factor was the information and technology revolution.

I would like to discuss this second factor in more detail because I believe that the information and technology revolution that we are witnessing poses amazing possibilities for people with severe disabilities to participate in tertiary education. I would like to draw attention to the impact that this technology has in assisting people with disabilities to access information at university.

If you have a mobility impairment like myself, the main difficulty that you face with research and study is physically accessing information. Computers, CD-ROMS, and the internet make possible the task of undertaking research and study independently from a wheelchair. I cringe when I think about studying at university before the information revolution. There is no way that I could have handled those fiddly draws with the even more fiddly call number cards, and where would I be without Webspurs and the instantaneous online searches. I can even access the information I need from my PC at home that is connected to the internet and the world's libraries and search engines via my cable modem.

Without a PC, producing my 100,000 word PhD thesis would be impossible without a full-time scribe. Now I can type comfortably, independently and at my own pace with my mini keyboard that is designed to make moving around the keyboard easier for people with a limited range of hand movement. Of course, my hands do tire, but then I can always try the ever-improving Voice Recognition Software that keeps improving in accuracy, ease and speed. This software can also read text for people with vision impairments, increasing the person's independence and privacy and reducing the cost incurred when employing readers.

We have come a long way but I believe that major changes are still to come. I look forward to a time when all books and journals are also available on CD-ROM and via the internet. This will mean that people with physical and visual impairments will finally have equal access to this information, making tertiary education more feasible for these individuals.

Our representation at tertiary institutions is steadily increasing as more of us are included in mainstream primary and secondary schools enabling us to secure places at university. There is a growing awareness that education is the key to the liberation of people with disabilities. Through education we can secure meaningful jobs where we can influence others and challenge society's negative attitudes towards us. Through our own education we will educate others and dispel the myths about people with disabilities.

Allow me to illustrate this with a personal example. When I completed my degree and my graduate diploma in psychology, I was able to gain a position as a tutor in the faculty of Business and Economics at Monash University. As a result, a situation was created where young people, many of whom had never met a person with a disability, were given an opportunity to have their preconceived ideas challenged and their ignorance dispelled.

At the start of each semester, I would look over a sea of frightened, bewildered and apprehensive faces that were in shock at the realisation that this person with a severe disability, who had a twisted neck and could barely move his arms, would be their tutor in business communication. By the second week, the shock disappeared and acceptance set in. I was even told by several students that I'd made them feel comfortable with disability, others told me that I inspired them and most of them said I was a hard marker! These students certainly learnt about business communication, they performed well and I felt proud of their grades, but their learning about the abilities of people with disabilities gives me an even greater sense of pride.

Looking back over my journey, I can see that it has been filled with many challenges that I struggled to overcome. Many times I have been in situations where I felt I was stuck, where I thought I was stupid and where I felt I could not survive in mainstream education. I have been lucky and things have changed just in time, just before I gave up and retreated.

Today, my journey continues as a PhD student at Deakin University, and a disability awareness consultant, who is speaking at Pathways 2000. As I look across the room, I know that there are many of you here who played a part in supporting me and other people with disabilities, by making your universities, TAFEs and colleges inclusive and sustaining environments for all students. . In my experience, the infrastructure is improving each year and support services are becoming more responsive and flexible. You probably spent many hours working late on funding submissions for minor works or for more money to employ support staff, so I could have a note taker or so my friend with a hearing impairment could understand his lectures through a sign language interpreter. You probably sat tirelessly through meetings advocating for us and I am here to say, 'thank you and well done'.

In keeping with what I have said here, as I end this speech, I don't want you to applaud me. I want you to see my achievements as testimony to what people with disabilities can achieve when the right support mechanisms are put in place. I want you to stand, if you can, and applaud all of the people in this room who played a part in building inclusive institutions, in order to make tertiary education accessible to myself and to my fellow Australians with different abilities.

Reference:

FSMA. (2000). Understanding Spinal Muscular Atrophy: A Comprehensive Guide. Families of SMA Webpage, www.fsma.org