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As a legally Blind Furniture Designer

I started writing this talk a few times and was unsure where to start. First of all I began with what I was going to say and not say, and looking at the big scale policies. In terms of this talk I only have a set time I can speak for and thus can only touch on some of the subjects I want to.

Often in society today people are interested in the individual's story. Obviously that is why I am able to speak today, it is because of my story not because I am some academic with a new theory that is being plucked out of the air. This talk is to explain a bit about my story and relate it to how things can be improved so that we have more equality in education and the arts in Australia and around the world.

In 2005 at the age of 18, I was diagnosed with Leber's Hereditary Optic Neuropathy (LHON). The condition took 12 months to reach its full degeneration and stabilise; leaving me with 1-5% vision concentrated around the peripheral field. The condition, although hereditary was not predetermined to affect me, so I was taken aback with some surprise. One of the last things on my mind during this period of degeneration was being able to get back into things that I enjoyed like woodwork.

Luckily, I had an uncle who had a similar condition and he helped me adapt to everyday things, especially using assistive software like screen readers on computers.

Woodwork is something that I enjoyed a lot leading up to this period, when I was fully sighted. So when I found out about legally blind people practising woodwork

in Melbourne, I was naturally quite excited. At the end of 2006 I went to partake in the Assist program run by Vision Australia in Melbourne. I had a 4 day crash course in how to do woodwork under the new circumstances, with a particular emphasis on using power tools/machines safely.

In 2007 I started Furniture Design as part of my Bachelor of Arts. The head of Furniture was particularly welcoming and was good at dealing with a circumstance that was new to all there. The attitude of the technicians was also particularly positive, although one had reservations to start with regarding safety. Due to the open mindedness of the staff, these reservations were worked through.

In terms of the actual practical side of the making in the course I was surprised by the things that I could do. An example of this is wood turning, the technician said he thought I could be able to turn based on his experiences in wood turning. He showed me by demonstrating, looking away and feeling how positioning the chisel on the spinning piece would feel and sound different if the tool was not cutting properly. This was taking something he used any way and applying it to my situation. Similarly the metal work technician thought of ideas for how to work metal, in particular figuring out how to position metal for drilling. His open mindedness also let me try to use the mig welder, but I did not have the greatest success with this. It is possible, there is a totally blind welder in Melbourne, but I believe that he had a fair bit of experience in industry, before his sight degenerated.

In terms of other strategies for working wood I would use the table saw like any one else, but turn it off, and isolate it from the power so there would be no chance of it being turned on while I was setting up a cut. Once this was done I would set the dimensions I wanted, be it the angle or depth of the blade or the length from the guide. This was done using a combination of tactile blocks put against the blade for depth or using my talking tape measure or vernier gauges. Once all the dimensions were set I would pull back the table, position the wood and turn the power back on and then switch on the machine and push through the machine, ensuring that my hands were clear from the blade, by not pushing my hands past a pre-determined spot. Some other machines would not be so involved to use, the buzzer, a big upside down electric planer, could easily be adjusted using the tactile depth gauge that everyone used any way. When cutting circles for stools I would use a jig that would have a pin for the square wood to rotate on around the band saw blades. Again using basic safety, which everyone should use, I would ensure the blade was not running before setting up the jig, and set the radius for the cut using the old mate of mine, the talking tape measure.

In the leaning leaf coffee table there were some non-standardised shapes that I had to cut. This table was designed in mind of me being able to make it. First of all I developed a full size mock up using MDF (craft wood). I refined the piece,

having the actual object in front of me, and refined the shape I wanted for the top and the angle of the legs, as well as working on the floating non-frame nature of the table. From this I went on to draw the profile of each component of the table. The drawing was done in Autocad, another student taught me basic skills in this. Once I got this shape, I worked out the amount I needed to offset each shape so that I would get the profile of each piece using a router. The jig was then cut out using a computer- controlled router so that I could use a hand electric router to make each table. Jigs are something that are often used by furniture makers to increase accuracy, or for batch production; so I was just taking what was already being used and applying it to my situation.

I was quite lucky that the staff were open to the idea of me doing this course, and that students were also equally as open to me being at the school. It was during my degree that I had to figure out what I could and couldn't do. It was great to have other people around to help problem solve, work out special techniques etc and help out doing something if needed. A number of my close friends have come through the Furniture Design department, I was lucky enough to have a good group of people coming through at a similar time.

I have set up a small scale, cottage industry work- shop (shed) at a friend's house. I have been using this set up to prepare for my exhibition that starts on April 12 and goes till April 29.

Among other things in my degree, I studied the Sociology of Health and in this, the theory that disability is a relative thing, was argued. People are considered disabled, partly because of the barriers that are put in front of them. What I would like to see is the removal of as many of these barriers as possible.

A humanitarian approach to this ought to be taken, not seeing the students in institutions as merely numbers, but as actual human beings who, each individually, get effected by policy. Sadly we can see the corporatisation of the higher education sector. This started with the Nelson review instituted under Howard and sadly we have not seen policy contrary to these reforms from The Rudd government.

This can be displayed in the erosion of funding for Arts, both fine and liberal, including the attempted and successful shutdowns of Arts Faculties at some universities around Australia. I understand that this conference is sponsored by the commonwealth government, which is good, but it would be good if as a student coming out of an institution which has lost funding, I could feel secure that generations to come will have institutions for quality education. An example of this is the fact that the Furniture Department at UTAS hasn't had a full time or permanent teacher for a number of years.

Having studied history as the other Major in my degree, it is apparent to me that the rights that we now have are due to struggles waged in the past. That for us to maintain rights we will have to organise to keep them. It is great that I was able to study at University, but there are some areas that need to be addressed in terms of increasing accessibility for students with disabilities. Another example of this is the fact that in Australia at the moment we rely on the private sector to tutor people with print disabilities on how to use assistive technologies. This is quite important for people to be able to access the arts and education. I was quite lucky with my circumstances, but now in Tasmania Guide Dogs have had to shut down their technologies branch and just concentrate on the mobility side of things. So for some one who has had recent degeneration of vision, they have to go to Melbourne, as there is nothing to teach say computer skills to the said persons. This would mean that the said person would be unable to enrol in higher education as they would be considered illiterate. This is of great concern to me, as if this had been the situation for me it would have meant that I would not have been able to access the education which I have. At the end of 2008 I went for a trip around a few different parts of the world. This included Latin America, where I heard of a program started up in Venezuela as part of a school for the blind for people all over the continent, funded by the Venezuelan government. I am sure there are areas where this could be improved and that if a developing country can deal with such issues in a proactive way then why can't our country's government?

At the end of 2009 UTAS decided to shut down the Student Access Study Centre. Ghd SASC was a great facility to use to study, having a range of positive accessibility uses. The students not seeing a sufficient alternative put up a bit of a fuss. This resulted in UTAS temporarily re-opening the Centre. A student group was formed this semester and we are in negotiations with the Uni to maintain an area for equal access for students with a disability. This is an example of students organising to maintain our rights and this is what will possibly have to be done to gain and maintain them in the future.

I have been quite lucky in my path and circumstances that led to me being able to quickly adapt and get into things that I enjoy a lot. What would be good to see is some of the barriers that currently exist being removed. Then my story of being able to partake in something that I enjoy is not the exception but the norm. That also attitudes are looked at so that it would not be a problem for a person with a vision impairment to get work in woodworking. Because at the moment, when people are diagnosed with conditions employers often don't want to know and are able to sack the worker (as I was when I worked as a medical orderly). For people to adjust to getting work in industry is not the easiest for the vision impaired, and this is greatly due to misconceptions.