

OUR VOICE — NICOLE

Q CAN YOU TELL ME A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF?

I am 24 years old. I have 20-year-old twin siblings and a dog named Milo. I have a Bachelor of Behavioural Science and a Graduate Diploma of Humanities & Social Sciences. I am currently employed two days a week as Administrative Assistant at Wild@heART Community Arts. I also contribute to DiVine, Victoria's largest on-line community for people with disability.

I am a very social person and love catching up with friends. I am passionate about writing, reading, music, the arts, AFL and travel. I dream of one day owning my own home with my family, complete with a garden and white picket fence.

Q WHAT'S IT LIKE HAVING A DISABILITY?

If disability can be measured on a scale, I am at the very lucky end. Yes, it affects my every day life in terms of my mobility and level of independence but I am not in pain and it is not a degenerative condition. Disability is all I have known and I haven't lost anything. It is not something I am constantly thinking about. I am Nicole before I am "Nicole



in the wheelchair." Much of the credit for this goes to my family whose motto is "where there's a will there's a way" and make sure that wherever possible I have the same experiences as my peers.

In saying that, being in my early twenties, a time when independence and forming your own identity away from your parents is natural, I have been feeling the gap widen between the milestones my friends and I are achieving. For example, many of my friends are moving out of home while I am learning how to transfer independently out of bed. It can be frustrating.

Q HOW DOES YOUR DISABILITY IMPACT ON THE THINGS YOU DO EACH DAY?

My disability affects my mobility and so whilst it doesn't prevent me from doing what I wish, it does affect how I do things. I need assistance with dressing and personal care. So for example, I can get out of bed at the desired time but I have to wake up my parents to help me get ready for the day.

Everyday tasks take longer and it seems like most things I do are a bigger deal or take more

planning than if I were able bodied. For example, I need to make sure a restaurant is accessible before I book or I have to try clothes on at home because I can't change myself or fit in the dressing rooms. I do go out to parties and nightclubs however my parents have to assist me with getting into bed so understandably I can't be out until all hours.

Q DOES YOUR DISABILITY HAVE A NAME?

Cerebral Palsy Spastic Diplegia. My legs are affected more than my arms, although I can weight bear and walk with a frame my fine motor skills are affected.

Q HOW HAS YOUR DISABILITY INFLUENCED YOUR SCHOOL AND WORK LIFE?

I went to a mainstream school, the same school as my Mum. I was the first student in a wheelchair to attend the school in its 90-year history. The school was made accessible with the installation of ramps and an integration aide to scribe for me and help with personal care. I was also given extra time to finish tasks.

The first year of secondary school was particularly difficult as the teachers often paid me special attention to make sure I was keeping up and to get used

to my needs. This caused some classmates to resent me as they believed the teachers were favoring me.

Once I was in a better headspace, people understood my needs and realised I was just Nicole who wanted to fit in and be treated the same as her peers. School became the setting for some of my favourite memories and I made some life-long friends.

I began volunteer work in order to make connections and get experience in the workplace. I am currently involved with an employment agency that is assisting me with job modifications. I am not fully educated yet on the rights of people with a disability in the workforce.

Q IF YOU HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO TALK TO THE AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTER ABOUT DISABILITY WHAT WOULD YOU SAY?

Please provide more support for people with disability and their parents. Full time caring is an underappreciated role that can feel isolating and affects the whole family.

I feel the government support system is unnecessarily complicated and inadequate. It means that many people who have been exposed to a lower level of education, have a

Do you know a child or young person with disability who would be interested in sharing their views in upcoming issues of Listen Up!? Please phone or email CDA for further information.

more severe disability or have difficulties with communication won't reach their potential. This makes many people with disability feel forgotten.

It takes a strong person with initiative and lots of time to navigate the system. Independence is the goal but unless you are involved in the disability field and able to break it down into smaller steps, it is quite a daunting and overwhelming process. Please make it easier.

Support the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Providing the right supports for people with disability will also be beneficial to the health system and economy. It is an important investment in the country's future and shows the youth of Australia that you believe in the value they bring to society.