

Dale's Story

Dale wrote his own story.

I had a motorbike injury at the end of 2002. Now I'm a T10 complete paraplegic. I'm in a wheelchair all the time. I can't move my legs or walk. I can't feel anything from about my bellybutton down.

I used to be a commercial pilot. So it took away my career as a pilot. I was also a licensed aircraft engineer, and I couldn't work on airplanes and crawl around in an aircraft, and pick up things in the hanger, and undo engines, and remove wings and wheels from a wheelchair, so it took away my other trade as well.

I had two trades by the time I was 26, and I worked very hard for those, and so that was a massive impact losing them. And so I was left at 26 with no qualifications I could fall back on.

If I had a qualification where I was sitting at a desk all the time, it wouldn't have made any difference at all. But because my office was an airplane flying in the sky, and the other one was very physical work working on airplanes my disability affected those jobs totally.

So, what do you do at that point? How do you make a living? I went back into aviation into an office job to manage an airline, but I couldn't get a disability pension. I didn't get any insurance, even though I had total and permanent disability cover and a superannuation policy.

They said, "No, you can't claim that unless you get four doctors to agree". I was left with massive debt mounting up in my life because that keeps going on. All of the banks still want their repayments on loans and things, and you've got no possible way at all to furnish that. And while I was in hospital, every week I spent in hospital, my debt was just going up. So I had to get out of hospital very quickly, or I would have gone bankrupt.

I just remember thinking, "Well, this is the type of stuff that can happen," and I just wanted to take care of my wife. I didn't want her to suffer through all of this. The health system doesn't allow any counseling for partners or spouses or family members, so Erica went into depression and very quickly, the focus was taken off me and what I'd lost, to what I could see I was still losing. I just wanted the damage to stop.

My back had been broken and my spinal cord was destroyed; I knew that wasn't going to get any better. It wasn't going to get any worse, but the damage kept on happening throughout my family, and with my wife, and there wasn't any support for that—there still isn't.

I get out to Hampstead Rehabilitation Centre every now and again, and every time I'm out there, I see someone else in a wheelchair, some young person, and I start talking to them. Their eyes light up when I start telling them all the great things I've been able to do in the last nine years, and they just didn't know.

I totally and utterly was in control of whether I got busy living or got busy dying. I obviously cannot speak from being born with a disability, but I've worked a lot with people that have been born with a disability, and right now I'm mentoring a fellow in Canada.

He was born with cerebral palsy. He wants to get into the professional speaking game, so I'm helping him to get his story together, get his important points down, and get his message solidified and very meaningful and impacting.

Even though he's in Vancouver, and I speak to him probably on average once a fortnight, he said, "You're the most motivational person I've had in my life because you don't care that I've got a disability. You care about what I'm going to do and make an effect next week and the week after. Everyone else is stuck on my disability, even though I've had it all my life".

He's 24 and he says, "I just don't think it's ever going to change. I just don't think that anyone that I meet from now on, is going to see me for being a person". I said, "Look, Marco, they will, it just takes a lot of hard work to get an able-bodied person to understand that you are a normal person with opinions and thoughts. Impacts can be made."

And he said, "Well that's what I find from talking to you Dale, is that we don't even talk about the disability, we talk about everything else, you know, getting everything done and getting everything moving".

If two able-bodied people get together, and one's really down in the dumps, always talking about the bad things that are going on, then no-one wants to end up talking to that person because they're too negative.

That's what I find with people with disability; they are always lumped into that mindset of the person listening to them and the assumption that, "Oh, I won't talk to that person, they're probably down in the dumps".

It's amazing when people do talk to me, that I'm the most empowering person they've met in a number of years, and I'm like, "See how you can get it wrong? Don't judge a book by its cover".

But that's what I've found was happening straight away in my life, so I had to adapt from going from being a captain for an airplane with a very important job—people's lives in my hands—going from having a very responsible job and signing aircraft maintenance out for planes that people are going to jump in and fly in, again, my word and my credibility was very important.

I had to go from that to losing everything, and people talking really slowly to me, and thinking I can't do anything myself, when my mind still thought I was the same person. I was still the same—responsible.

This is the thing with an acquired injury that is different, because there's a marked change in the life you built before your injury, and the life you're living afterwards. There's a massive line in the sand there, and that's a big mental hurdle for me to overcome.

The way that I overcome that was to think, "Well, I've got to create and make an impact, and make a difference, or take action in my form of wheeling myself around". I've had a lot of people in those first couple of years that hadn't seen me. The first time that they saw me in a wheelchair their face was just full of sorrow, and it's very draining to deal with people like that, because you then become the counsellor, telling them that it's all okay and not to worry, and that's draining energy-wise.

I grew up on a fruit property in a country area. From six or seven years of age, I had very responsible jobs to do, like driving a tractor along an orange tree row while Dad was maybe walking alongside spraying with a-held spray unit.

I had responsible jobs, that taught me independence from the start, and when I was eight or nine, Dad would say, "Get in the ute and go around and check all the sprinklers for me".

It would be a 45 minute job, many times putting the car into gear and driving, stopping, handbrake on, getting out, checking 30 or 40 sprinklers along the tomato row, coming back, getting in, driving down another 20 metres, and the whole time I was thinking, "Got to make sure I don't miss any, this is our crop, this is our family's livelihood." Or, "I've found one, great."

Pull out the spare parts in my pocket, fix the thing, get covered in water, sometimes it'd be cold and windy, and I'd come back, and Dad would say, "How did you go?" And I said, "Yeah, I found about five or six". He said, "Good—good on you".

If I ever come back and I didn't find any he would say, "Well, did you do it properly because there's always clogged ones". So that was even before I was ten. I can remember all this.

I learnt to fly aeroplanes when I was 16. It was the end of Year 11 that I had my first flying lesson. During Year 12, I got my solo licence, and during high school I'd go out to the aerodrome, get in a plane, and during lunchtime I'd fly the airplane back over the high school.

I'd swoop really low over where my mates were playing football. I also loved being the joker and doing impersonations, being funny, and all through school I was always a performer, contributing to social gatherings. I know that people would say, "Got to

have Dale come along to the party”, and when I’d rock up at the party, I’d change the whole energy level of the party.

It was easy for me to do it, I enjoyed it, and so I did it, and a big part of my concern after becoming a paraplegic, I thought am I still going to be able to be that person? Are people going to be too transfixed on my disability now, to not allow me to take that role, or to be in that position? Are people not going to want to communicate with me now because I’ve got nothing of interest that I do. It’s just a big sob story about what I’ve lost. So, there was a massive fracture in my identity.

Luckily I’d done a lot of training around personal development, and I think one of the key things for me was when I was 15 in 1990, I did a personal development course called Discovery which was seven days of me being away from home down at McLaren Vale, just learning a whole heap of awesome tips and sayings, and putting them into play.

Things like, “If it’s to be, it’s up to me” and, “If it’s possible in the world, it’s possible for me”. I learnt about comfort zones and internal dialogue—that little voice that’s active inside your head a lot of the time, and at 15, it is a massive bonus to have that awareness when you start adult life.

These things keep flooding back in from time to time, and you might resist them, but they are that useful and that right, that when you do put it into play you realise actually this is the way to live.

I say to people, “What are you lining yourself up for? What are you bulletproofing yourself for?” I just luckily had bulletproofed myself for something that a lot of people would consider absolutely devastating, because I had the attitude that I did. I didn’t know that I was going to become a paraplegic, but no-one knows when bad things are going to happen.

I think that anyone can cope on the beautiful blue sky days where it’s a nice 26 degrees and everything’s going well—that’s not hard to live. As a human that’s not what we are mainly here for in our life.

It’s what we do when things go bad. What resources have we got ready to go? What attitudes can we adapt and adopt? Can we still keep running and keep having the same values and the same priorities when things are tough? I think that’s a real true test of character.

It’s about bringing back the things that made them different to what they are now, and not through the physical aspect of movement and strength. It’s about, “How did you make people feel?”

There’s a saying by a fantastic poet and writer and performer in America; Maya Angelo is her name, a black African-American woman, a beautiful spirited lady. She

said: “People will forget what you said, they will forget what you did, but they will never forget the way you make them feel.”

I believe it’s totally true. People will remember after an argument, or after an altercation, the way that you made them feel. So, a lot of the work I do now, corporate-wise, and the courses that I run, are focused on: “What feelings are you delivering around the world, around your environment when you interact with it?”

So whether you’re blind, hearing impaired, vision impaired, whether you’re in a wheelchair, whether you’ve got cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy, or any disability at all—if you know that secret—that no matter what you do you’ve got the ability to make people feel a certain way, then you’re ahead of 99% of the population.

They go around thinking that it’s just haphazard; “If I make some people happy today, well that’s just lucky.” And I’d say to people with disabilities, and as I will say to these paraplegics that I’m going to be working with and people that I’ve worked with in the past, “Before you were a paraplegic, how did you make people feel?”

I just love having people with smiles on their faces. I grew up in a country town, where the underlying tone of the town was to support and help people. A lot of people didn’t know why, but it didn’t matter, it was such an ingrained attitude, that most people were happy, happy doing what other people would see as mundane, boring things.

They’d say, “I’ve been doing this job all my life and I’m going to keep doing it”. They’re happy, content in themselves because the underlying thing is that they had a part of their minds or souls available to contribute beyond themselves, whenever it happened, and it wouldn’t matter if a fire came through, or if a flood came through, or whatever, everyone would drop what they’re doing and help.

And we see that from time, we saw it in Brisbane this year with the floods, and it’s empowering, isn’t it, when we see this happen in our country. And then we see riots in England, and we say, “Oh, the stupid idiots”. We don’t like it, that’s the opposite end of it, but we love it when people get together and help out.

I think that that should be the absolute theme that we all get out of bed with in the morning, “How can I contribute beyond myself today to help someone that’s going to be in trouble?”, and run our lives wholly and solely based on that.

I’m not of any religious faith, but I know that that is the background of every major religion in the world: “What can I do beyond myself to help other people?” It’s Christianity, it’s Hinduism, it’s Muslim, but everyone just chooses to forget that bit.

Why? Because it’s bloody hard; it takes effort; it’s difficult. And I have a saying, “Nothing of any substance is easy”. What is it that enables me to do all this? Well, I’m aware that if I tried to subdue it or try to cover it over, I’d feel really bad in myself,

I'd feel that my whole life has just been wasted. I might as well go and stop breathing because I'm using up the oxygen of someone else that needs that oxygen to do something better. It's just all so straightforward to me, you know?

There's an abundant supply of energy when you live your life like that. There's a whole heap of books written about it. If you give your energy out, the universe will resupply you with it naturally.

There's a whole heap of books, a whole heap of people making money talking about the laws of attraction, books like *The Secret* and *Thinking-Grow Rich*. They're trying to put it into very simple terms to get people to give it a go and see if it works for them.

It might be a scheme that's pre-planned in their mind that they can live by. I don't think it's as simple as reading a book, or attending a one day 'rev-up' seminar. I think it's a style of life that you need to choose to adopt.

I was this type of person from when I was a little kid. My Mum said that I was an "old soul". I had a level of awareness of what we're doing here on earth, even when I was going to primary school. I'd always shelter the kids that were getting bullied, and I'd always sort out the bullies. I had that feeling of, "I don't care if I die, I don't care if I get stabbed, I'd rather live with a purpose, than get to the end of my life, and not have made any effect".

What I'm telling you I do now with paraplegics. I did that myself; I gave, I contributed, even though I was in a chair, I could still tell someone that they inspired me, gave me a great performance, and I think that they did a great job—well done. I can still do that.

Just keep doing all the things you can still do. You'll be so busy—it's not the 10,000 things you can't do, it's the 9,000 things you can. You focus on them, and you'll go to your death bed very, very busy, with a very full calendar.

<http://www.daleelliott.com/>

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