

John's Story

John told his story in a recorded interview. Additional information was modified from an online story "My article about John Hughes from MasterChef Australia", written by Carly Finlay.

John: I have mild Cerebral Palsy, affecting my coordination, my speech and the pace of my walking. I live in the Barossa Valley, South Australia.

Rieslingfreak - My own wine label

John: I'm a self-employed winemaker and have my own wine label called Reislingfreak. With the winemaking, I focus on Riesling, which is a white wine. I harvest the grapes and keep the wine in bottles within four or five months. So in that period of time, I'm intensely in the winery and looking over the wine. Outside of that period I am busy with other projects.

A talented cook

Researcher: John is also a talented cook and says his love of wine came before his interest in cooking. "My parents bought the first vineyard in the Clare Valley," John says. "Being involved in the family vineyard was the start of my interest in wine." John studied wine marketing at university. "My food interests came about 12 years ago," he explains. "I think with the appreciation of good wine came an appreciation of good food. My specialities are focused around tarts, specifically chocolate tart."

John's friends and family saw he was a talented cook. They really appreciated his food. John says this gave him the confidence to audition for series three of MasterChef. He wanted to see if he could get his food acknowledged by the judges.

John's cooking talent and strong character were highlighted on the show. In one elimination round, contestants were challenged by Maggie Beer to cook a tart, a flan and a pudding. John chose not to present his food to the judges for tasting because he did not believe the dishes were up to a high enough standard. He believed he didn't have enough time to put his "heart and soul" into the cooking. The judges and public commended him on his decision. John was the first contestant in three seasons not to present food on MasterChef.

John says the experience of being on MasterChef taught him a lot about food and the food industry. It has also given him the urge to get into food and wine media, and to become involved in mentoring and inspiring children living with CP, through cooking.

John: I do a lot of CP work around Australia. I've currently got a number of CP projects around Australia with individual organisations, and also a lot of personal aims. With CP, I've always been very introverted about it. I've always kept it to myself, and there are a lot of challenges that you have when you live with CP. Since MasterChef I have become more extroverted about my CP. When I've been speaking to people with CP, they speak to me about the same challenges that I faced. I went on to MasterChef to be myself, and my story was going to be, "I'm a

winemaker". But MasterChef being MasterChef took my CP as my story, and it was from that point onwards I went from being an introvert to an extrovert about my CP. After MasterChef I decided to use the media to help the children of Australia that live with CP.

Striving towards employment

John: I was lucky enough to go to a mainstream school. In my day I had to use an electric typewriter which later became a laptop computer towards the end of high school. I had a teacher's aide as needed, in terms of doing diagrams and things like that when required.

I focussed on business subjects at school, because I thought that's something I could excel in, either by myself or with a company. I went to university and studied wine marketing by correspondence. I worked in casual employment. By doing that I could study at my own pace as well. It took me a bit longer than the other students, but I was still able to achieve.

I found it very difficult to get work when I left school. I found myself applying for jobs, getting to the interview stage and not going much further. I eventually took on work experience at a place called the Australian Wine Research Institute, and I was there for three months doing work experience. They then gave me a casual position which later on became full-time and I stayed for ten years.

Towards the end of that time, I was applying for jobs, and once again, getting to the interview stage, and not getting any further. I've always found it hard to gain employment. I get to the interviews, but find people very much judge me on my disability.

I've managed to get jobs as a winemaker. My jobs have all been built on contacts I've made through the industry, and with the people who have got to know me and my abilities.

Achieving through work

Personally I have a strong need to prove myself, both at work and socially. I have found a workplace environment where I am able to achieve. This is different to a number of my friends who achieve through sport.

Twenty years ago in my first job I had to do three month's work experience to prove myself. All my employment, and now my business, have all been based on that three month's work experience. Now, if I had sat back and waited for a job to come along, who knows how my career may have ended up?

But because I went out there and said, "Guys, this is who I am, and these are my abilities," they were able to see for themselves that I had the abilities to go further. I think my strong work ethic has come from my brothers, who were both very much sports-minded. I was always down there watching them play sport, achieving, and I needed to achieve. I needed to show people I had abilities and I needed to work out where that was. For me it was in the workplace. There are so many things we can do, there's no point focussing on what we can't do.

As I say to the children I work with, there's no point me wanting to be an electrician because I'm too shaky - no matter how much study I do, what I do, or how I do it, there's no point me having that goal in life. You need to focus on what is achievable, and what is realistic.

Friends and family are my support. They're the ones that help you and guide you, and give you faith in your ability. Family and friends have been so important in my life. They are my "Latte and croissant".

The value of mentors

John: From a workplace perspective there are a couple of people in the wine industry who have been my mentors. They've shown me how to make wine, and more importantly, they have shown me I've got the ability in the wine industry. I regard those couple of people highly, and when I have my down days, I think of them and the way they've told me I can do things.

Personally I think mentoring is important from all levels, beginning with children going through school, and that's a big part of what I'm doing now, mentoring kids. Teenagers and young adults need mentors. Someone they can look up to up to and something they can strive toward.

I'm doing cooking classes with children. The main purpose of the kitchen class is mentoring and to show children their abilities in the kitchen - which has just been amazing. I focus on a three-day cooking class with the kids with the first day about making sandwiches.

It's surprising the number of children aged between eight and twelve who haven't made a sandwich before! Mum and Dad do it for them because it's a lot quicker and easier. We do some baking in the afternoon, which allows the children to use the stove and oven.

On day two, they do a main dish for lunch, and we have a big mentoring session in the afternoon. Day three isn't a lesson day, it's when the parents and invited guests come for dinner, with the children preparing a three course meal.

Part of the cooking class is mentoring the children. All they want to hear is that you've been down that same road. By telling them what has happened to me, and saying "I know what you mean," just makes them realise they're not alone.

A message to parents

John: The message I'm trying to get out there to parents is that I fully understand it's a lot easier and quicker for them to do things for their children, but at the same time, they must realise they're taking away the child's ability and independence in doing so.

When I was young, I used to drag my feet and hold my hand in the air. My Dad would tell me a hundred times a day to pick up my feet and put down my hand and I

used to think I had the worst father in the world. But now I can honestly tell you, I had the best father in the world.

I was only on TV for a week and the media I got was unbelievable. Like I said before, I had the choice of shelving the media, or using it, and I've used it for Australian children living with CP and their families.

Being my own boss and having my own business has been very fortunate in that I've been able to make the wine business a three or four day a week thing. At the moment, I'm doing a lot of volunteer work. With CP I'm involved in bocce in the Barossa for the Paralympics. I'm also coaching soccer with the little ones and I'm involved in the South Australian Paralympic Soccer Team as well.

I am very proud of my own wine business. When I was sixteen years old I dreamt that one day I would like my own wine business to be able to make my own wine, and have my own wine label, and at the age of thirty-five, I was able to release my first wine. So it was a nineteen-year dream, but I'm a big believer in setting goals, and if I went through each individual goal to get where I was, I reckon there'd be hundreds of goals.

Suggestions for other people in a similar situation

If I was making suggestions to other people, number one would be to always set personal and achievable goals. They need to be realistic and have sensible timeframes so that you can always achieve them.

I think it's also important to look at the "glass half-full" instead of the "glass half-empty". To me it is all about looking at all the positives, looking at everything we can do, and never worrying about the things you can't do. There's no point worrying about things because you can't do them. So, achieve what you can and strive hard for it.

Creating a self employment resource

One of my personal aims is developing a website called www.cpbusiness.com.au which is all about promoting businesses run and operated by people with CP. More importantly, CP Business is all about promoting businesses with ability. The aim is to have the website up and running for CP Week 2012. Hopefully the media will promote the website and more importantly people with abilities.

The reason I'm starting up the website, www.cpbusiness.com.au is because by travelling Australia and talking to people with CP, it's come to my attention that many people with CP have chosen self-employment as a form of employment. That's the idea behind this project. If you go into self-employment you need to lift your abilities and your knowledge and work out how you are able to apply that into a business format.

At the moment I'm funding the project myself, and then once it's up and going, we'll look at funding long-term. Hopefully it's going to be something that will get the message to businesses out there.

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