

## Tony's Story

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Tony wrote his own story.

### **My backgrounds**

I was born into a working-class family in Manchester, England in 1948, and we migrated to Australia when I was 16 years old. My parents were from Ireland. My Father died 10 years ago and my Mother is 96 years old not out.

My Dad had a pretty hard life. He was born into an "Irish tinker" way of life; he only ever had contact with one family member, his Mother. He was later shot and wounded in the Second World War. He liked a drink or two and smoked all his life, but managed to live to 88 years of age. My mother's earliest employment was as a nurse-maid. At 96 she is still better than me at crosswords.

I was born partially sighted; I had some daytime vision, but, I was very night-blind. I was aware of the stigma of having a disability from quite an early age; I trained my friends to assist me without it looking obvious so that I appeared to be "normal". I couldn't catch a ball, so sport wasn't my strong point. I joined a Church fife and drum band. There were about 50 kids in the band and we all had a great time driving around the north of England in an old double-decker bus to play at all sorts of community events and processions.

I attended a boys-only catholic high school in a pretty rough part of Manchester. I couldn't see anything on the blackboard and consequently did poorly at school. Throw in a few sadistic teachers, and, I eventually came to my senses and stopped going to school at the age of 14. I hung around town playing truant with a friend of mine who later committed suicide.

Eventually, a friend got me a job as a vegetable cook in a large mill which was full of office workers, including lots of young girls. I lived a long way from my school and in those days, parents had little or nothing to do with teachers; their job was to just send you to school, the rest supposedly took care of itself. So, each morning I left home in my school uniform and got to work where I donned my chef's outfit and did my job. I earned just less than five quid a week. Although I was more adventurous than mature, I had a bit of money in my pocket and lived a kind of adult lifestyle, smoking cigarettes and drinking at one or two easy-going pubs. I worked there until we left for Australia. My family arrived in Adelaide in 1964 and it seemed a bit "behind the times" compared to England where the "music revolution" was in full swing.

After doing a stint at Finsbury migrant hostel, where one of my brothers got stabbed in the arm, we moved into a house in the wild and woolly Elizabeth West. I soon made a few friends and integrated into "Elizabeth culture".

## Employment and travel

My first job in Australia was assisting a courier deliver parcels around the city. On my first day, I fell down a big flight of stone stairs that I couldn't see; that was the end of that job, and, nearly of me! I next got a job at Dalgetty's wool store in Port Adelaide lugging bales of wool around. It was another dangerous job for someone with my level of eyesight, plus, I had to hitch-hike there and back each day from Elizabeth West. At Christmas, as was the practice then, a mob of us were laid-off. Someone from the wool store heard that I couldn't see very well and connected me up with the then Royal Institution for the Blind, which led to me working in a sheltered workshop making mats. It was an unusual experience. I earned next to no money. The work conditions were hot and uncomfortable and I hated being scrutinised when groups of people were being shown around, but I met a few interesting and friendly "blindies" there. After that I did a stint at St.Helen's Rehabilitation Centre, where I had a lovely time painting and trying sports like archery (for some reason, people used to run away when I picked up the bow).

While I was involved with these two institutions, I went to great lengths to conceal from my friends, what I did during the day. I made up all kind of stories. I was deeply ashamed of anything to do with disability, especially the sheltered workshop bit. Anyway, I eventually got a job as a clerk in Elizabeth. I probably shouldn't admit this, but, most days I drove the company car to pick up the mail and deliver the odd parcel. I used to pick up a friend of mine who lived close to my workplace and she assisted me to get around without killing myself or anyone else for that matter. I have to admit my efforts to hide my disability resulted in some dangerous situations at times.

When I turned 21 I set off overseas and travelled for more than two years doing the "global hippy thing". During this period, I learnt a lot and had many adventures, including being accused of spying in former Yugoslavia, where I and my three friends were detained, interrogated by a military officer, and eventually set free, but not before the soldiers had pulled our car to pieces and destroyed our many camera films. On another occasion, we met with a palisade of machine gun-bearing soldiers when we were trying to get into Albania late at night. Doesn't everyone do this kind of thing when they are young? I travelled from England back to Australia overland through lots of interesting Asian countries. I landed back in Australia with little money but with wealth of experience. It took me a while to get used to sleeping in a bed again.

I looked like the archetypal hippy, which was fine until I tried to get a job. Australia was still a few years behind Britain and Europe in many ways. My appearance prevented me from getting any kind of decent job, so, after a couple of months of failure, I took a factory job in Kilburn, working 12 hour shifts on a horribly exploitative bonus system. This was the most unpleasant job I have ever had. I stayed there for

two years. I of course hid my disability, which made the job dangerous at times, but, after a while, I got the hang of it and became a top bonus earner.

I eventually got another job, ironically at the Royal Society for the Blind, by stuffing my long hair under a Vidal Sassoon wig for the interview. The job was organising fundraising, aids, equipment, and social and cultural activities for blind and sight impaired people. After a couple of weeks at my new job, I stopped wearing my wig, much to everyone's surprise; I'm pleased to say, they continued to employ me; I think they were too shocked to take any action.

### **Gaining confidence**

I left my job with the Royal Society for the Blind at the age of 25 and enrolled in an adult matriculation school. Although I knew I was a survivor, I had little confidence in my intellect or academic ability. I met loads of new people and it was a great year for parties. As is often the case in people's lives, one person convinced me that I had the ability to pass at least some of my five subjects. It was not far from exam time, so I stopped partying and started to study hard.

A few days before the matric results came out, my mentor teacher, John Mitchel, visited to inform me that I had topped the state in modern European history with a mark of 100 per cent plus. I got distinctions and credits in five subjects. I mention this at the risk of boasting, because it was a huge turning point in my life. For the first time, I had official endorsement that I had a reasonable mind and intellect. I can't describe how important this experience was in giving me a new self-confidence.

### **Finding music**

Although music has always been a major passion for me, I didn't take up playing until I was 30. I bought a humble tin whistle and started playing. Within a few weeks I was out busking with a "pommie" mate of mine. I went on to play the flute saxophone, clarinet, percussion and a few odd ethnic instruments.

I played in bands and started up new bands. I absolutely love playing music, and I have been fortunate to have played at many great community events, as well as a few high profile gigs at places like the Festival Centre and the Adelaide Town hall.

### **Community involvement**

I have always liked organising and innovating community events and resources. The list includes reading groups, food co-operatives, big street parties, Zoo-Do's (Acoustic music events at the Adelaide Zoo which ran for 10 years), and loads of community events and Festivals. In 1987, I organised, what was considered to be, the most successful and culturally diverse state folk festival to date. It's always a lot of hard work but the thrill I get when the outcome, whatever it is, all starts happening around me is utterly enthralling.

My attitude towards my disability started to change during the 90s. The changes accelerated after I took on a position with Arts in Action. The job was to create a legally registered organisation, from what had so far been, a group of volunteers (including the then ever-creative Cathy Nirta) who had started the ball rolling in initiating disability arts projects. Arts in Action soon became the peak disability arts organisation in South Australia.

So, I started applying what organisational skills I had, to organising disability inclusive and disability-led arts projects. I was director of that organisation for 12 years during which time I had many adventures and learned a tremendous amount. The first big project was a weekend arts camp at Mannum on the Murray River, for more than 100 people with disabilities and their support teams. It was a pretty wild weekend, with singing, dancing, African drumming and everything from cabarets to canoeing.

Other memorable projects included, Fringe out West, a three-day event held in the western suburbs, which was the largest and most diverse fringe event, the largest disability event ever in the Adelaide Fringe and the biggest indigenous event that year.

Without reminiscing on too many ground-breaking projects, I will jump to the High Beam International Disability Arts Festival, a 10 day biennial festival. High Beam was the first international disability festival in Australasia and it inspired similar festivals in Canada, (the Kickstart Festival) and England, (Above and Beyond Festival).

The opening night of the first festival particularly stays in my mind. The Lantern Parade saw half of Adelaide closed to traffic on a Friday night, including Victoria and Hindmarsh squares. The Parade consisted of 3000 people carrying candle-lit lanterns made by people with disabilities, marching bands, bands on trucks, buses, light beams and more. The parade culminated in Hindmarsh square which was decorated with coloured perimeter lights, where we more than 100 people with disabilities in a giant choir singing the High Beam Song while cannon fireworks were going off, and, while a burning man and dog emerged from within a huge burning cake. It really had to be witnessed to be believed. What fantastic memories to have. I directed the first three festivals before leaving Arts in Action.

### **My next phase of life**

I wasn't sure what the next phase of my life was going to be but I applied for, and was awarded, a two year fellowship from the Australia Council, which renewed my self confidence because there are only two or three allocated throughout Australia each year. During those two years I also applied for a Churchill Fellowship and was also successful. I spent two years researching disability arts models both here and overseas, and developed projects here in Adelaide. I also set up my own business, Tony Doyle Visions (TDV), around 10 years ago.

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A TDV project I consider to have been very successful was the Somersault Project. The six year duration of this project saw the development of a ten-tonne multi-arts installation from a transformed 12 metre shipping container. This transportable arts icon was fully accessible and decked-out with electronic gizmos which gave people, as they walked or wheeled through, an interactive experience reflecting the creative achievements of people with disabilities involved in the project. The colourfully painted “See-tainer”, as it was called, had a 12 metre colourful canopy extension which covered a stage/performance space. Coupled with an amazing array of numerous colourful market umbrellas, painted by people with disabilities, the total installation became a creative village which featured at Adelaide’s Festival Theatre fore-court, several festivals, both here and interstate, and at a number of regional locations.

TDV has been running a very successful monthly gig at the Governor Hindmarsh Hotel for many years now. The MusicWorks continues to feature many of Adelaide’s top bands and performers, including performers with a disability, and continues to attract between 250 to 300 people each event. Our audience is mainly comprised of people with learning or multiple disabilities and their support teams and is open to the general community. The dance floor is always packed and the gig is always wild and exciting.

Another project which has been going for three years now is The SoundWaves Project funded by the Department for Communities and Social Inclusion. SoundWaves consists of two or more workshops and a free community event each month. The workshops are in percussion with some songs and movement. Another workshop focus is on music and performance for people who want to have a go at performing with an audience. The community events offer a first step for people to get out there and “strut their stuff”. Each year I also organise one-off disability arts events which attract hundreds of people with disabilities from a wide geographical area. They are usually multi arts events built around musical performance.

Of course my artistic achievements have depended on me having access to teams of skillful people. One person in particular I would like to mention is Robert Petchell who has played a key role in numerous projects over the past 20 years. I also acknowledge the role of my partner Jane, who has managed to get my administration and finances all running smoothly and efficiently.

### **Expressing myself**

In general, I have used myself in part, as a reference point for much of the work I have carried out. One of my anxieties about gradually losing my sight was that it led me to social isolation. I’m reasonably gregarious, so, I had an impetus to create processes and events which placed me among people; what better vehicle than the arts.

I've always loved music and other expressions of human creativity so I kind of fell into my own destiny. I soon realised I wasn't alone with my social and artistic concerns and aspirations; many other people with disabilities face extra barriers when it comes to accessing social and creative opportunities. Blindness can be one hell of a pain in the butt at times, but, the paradox is, that it has ironically been a big determining factor in how I have developed my life and my career.

### **Living with disability**

I'm now totally blind and often feel frustrated by my level of dependence on others to carry out so many of life's tasks, but I can still cook a tasty meal and Jane and I love dancing (I haven't toppled any tables lately), so, I guess life isn't too bad really. A blind person in our society can lead a life of quality and diversity, although it has to be said that the unemployment rate for 'blindies' is unacceptably high in Australia.

I still remember my emotional reaction to feeling inferior and deficient because of my disability; I suppose it's given me a greater sense of empathy with many other people. There's a level at which I'm still not confident even at my tender age; it's a childhood legacy, but, I've overcome a lot of that.

In some ways I haven't ever fitted into the mainstream. My early involvement in the institutions of education and vocation were hallmarked by a feeling of failure. I've kind of grown up a little bit as an outsider in some ways. It was the informal life that I felt more comfortable with, as a kid out on the streets, and as an adult, going out socially. But I wasn't comfortable or confident in the formal world.

For me, music has been the salient gift of life that has opened up a huge resource pool of people and opportunity. Music provided a gateway to my work and innovation in community arts. Individuals with a disability who are isolated can't afford to wait to be assimilated into mainstream society; the process is too slow for many and doesn't happen at all for others.

The idea behind my work is to use the arts as a vehicle for building creative and inclusive communities and to negotiate integration from a position of community strength and support.

Individualised funding should, if implemented well, will result in us (people living with disability) being more self-determined and directed. However, I believe we still, maybe more than ever, need to connect and organize around the affinity of disability; strength in numbers and all that.

### **To sum it up**

In summary, I've taken a few risks, and, had some good fortune and opportunities. I have travelled to more than 40 countries (many on my own). I once wrote and

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performed a one-man music and theatre production, entitled *Blind Visions*, in Adelaide and Washington DC. I'm about to marry my soul-mate, my partner Jane, and we live in a lovely apartment in the middle of town.

In addition to Jane, I love music, dance and humour, the latter being a great way of dealing with just about everything in life.

So, what's around the corner? I don't know. There will be more disability art projects and I look forward to sharing the rest of my days with Jane. I still struggle with some things but I value my life and I hope it continues for many years to come.

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