Purple Orange Podcast, Episode 1: Underrepresented, Undervalued, Underpaid

**SPEAKERS**

Belle Owen (host), Carey Scheer (narrator), Gavin Burner (guest), Laynie Dunne-Heynis (guest)

**Belle Owen** 00:01

Hello, and welcome to the Purple Orange podcast where we shine a light on the stories of people with disability in our community. This podcast was recorded on Kaurna land. For those of you who may be new to the podcast, my name is Belle Owen, and I'll be your host for this season. As a proud disabled woman, I love having the opportunity to share the stories of my community. It is so important that we have a space where we can tell our own stories in our own words, in our own ways. This season, we bring you six stories of people with disability from all walks of life. We'll hear stories of parenthood, internalised ableism, education, and more. Our first story hits on employment. Historically, people with disability in the workforce have been underrepresented, undervalued, and underpaid. It took Gavin Burner many years, but eventually he broke through those barriers. He shares his story with Carey Scheer. A warning that this story mentions suicide, which some listeners may find distressing. For 24/7 crisis support call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or visit lifeline.org.au/gethelp.

**Carey Scheer** 01:17

Imagine if you worked in a job that you loved. You'd been there for ten years, worked hard. But then one day a new CEO comes on board, calls you into the office and says, “We're lowering your wages by nearly $10 an hour”. And it's just you being singled out, by the way. It would be horrible, right? Well, that's pretty much the situation Gavin Burner found himself in.

**Gavin Burner** 01:45

They said, do it or I could lose my job, this will be my last day. Just like that. So, I was in my mind to leave or not to leave. Would anybody else employ me?

**Carey Scheer** 02:03

What would you do? Quit on the spot? Storm out? Seek legal action? Or would you stay on and take the humiliating and life changing pay cut? Before we tell you what Gavin did, you need to understand why this decision was so hard for him. Gavin has intellectual disability. And because of the way society tends to judge that, for his entire working life he's kind of received the message that growth and evolution weren't really for him.

**Gavin Burner** 02:33

I was a farmer's son and dad told me I was not going be a farmer. So he said, go to a sheltered workshop, or ADE they call it these days, and I had no choice.

**Carey Scheer** 02:49

In the 90s Gavin was employed by a sheltered workshop as a house painter.

**Gavin Burner** 02:54

I think I don't know how many houses I painted for 40 cents, 40 cents an hour, and now I worked myself up as a team leader, which I went from 40 cents to a dollar an hour.

**Carey Scheer** 03:07

Were you just living on a total shoestring?

**Gavin Burner** 03:09

Less than shoestring. Or you just got enough to buy your soap, shampoo and that’s it.

**Carey Scheer** 03:16

Were they saying, hey, Gavin, this is a stepping stone. You're gonna go on to do bigger, better, greater things?

**Gavin Burner** 03:24

Well, no, probably that's where you got to. I know a couple people who still work in sheltered workshops and they’re doing what they did 20 years ago.

**Carey Scheer** 03:38

Even though Gavin was looking at life in a sheltered workshop, he still desired to grow. And so he spent his spare time at WEA. It's a place that offers classes to adults on pretty much any subject you can think of.

**Gavin Burner** 03:53

I did me arts and crafts. I remember I did a boat motor course, way above my level. I didn't finish it, but I live at WEA because I, that was my outlet of advancing myself, not trying to keep myself “normal”. Whatever normal is.

**Carey Scheer** 04:20

Gavin did leave the sheltered workshop, there was a factory hiring people with disability, and Gavin became one of their recruits. And even though they actively sought out people with disability, he was hired in open employment. He was paid a normal wage. But after six years, the factory had layoffs and Gavin was one of them. He didn't think he'd be able to get another job. But after having a taste of open employment, he was not willing to go back to a sheltered workshop. But he still desired to grow. So he went down to his local community centre and signed up for adult literacy classes. And while there, he noticed a room full of people down the hall.

**Gavin Burner** 05:05

I said, what do they do in that room over there, to the teacher and she said, oh, they got like aged care and disability. I must have thought, I will go over, and I signed some papers.

**Carey Scheer** 05:20

And just like that, Gavin became a volunteer in disability and aged care.

**Gavin Burner** 05:25

And yeah, so, I joined and I've got a purpose to get up out of bed and go and do something for that day.

**Carey Scheer** 05:34

Gavin volunteered for two straight years. Then one day, he told them he was moving on to a new volunteer opportunity in a national park.

**Gavin Burner** 05:43

And that day they came back and said, Gavin, we would like to employ you and you will get paid for it.

**Carey Scheer** 05:52

When he told me that, it did make me wonder, would they have let them go on volunteering forever if he didn't say anything about leaving?

**Gavin Burner** 06:00

I think I got told a person with disability is paid as low as seven dollars or six dollars, but you're worth more than that so they thought, ten dollars is a fair thing.

**Carey Scheer** 06:13

They told Gavin that he needed to go to TAFE and get either a certification in disability or aged care. They told him that once he finished his certification, he would get a normal award wage just like everybody else.

**Gavin Burner** 06:28

I decided to do disability, but I am a person with a disability and can a disability person go to TAFE? I want to see, can I do it? I passed, I got my piece of paper.

**Carey Scheer** 06:44

But after Gavin finished TAFE nobody mentioned his wage review. You finished TAFE and they didn't honour that?

**Gavin Burner** 06:52

No.

**Carey Scheer** 06:53

And did you ever ask?

**Gavin Burner** 06:56

Maybe I didn't. I will say I probably grateful I've got ten dollars. I've got a purpose, got to get out of bed and doing something with my life.

**Carey Scheer** 07:08

But not being paid equal to his peers had an impact. And not just financially.

**Gavin Burner** 07:15

You feel like you're not part of the team. I felt like I was somewhere between a volunteer and a staff member, kind of like a like a rubber band and stretch it, and the rubber band got stuck halfway, you're halfway there, but not there.

**Carey Scheer** 07:41

But he told himself it was worth it. It was okay. Because he loved the work.

**Gavin Burner** 07:46

I remember when I first got it. I said, I got the best job in Australia, but don't tell anybody that. I guess the clients, you feel loved with the clients. It was really powerful for me because my person with disability to say “I’m making a difference in myself and for them”.

**Carey Scheer** 08:13

One of the things Gavin loved the most was listening to his clients talk about their lives.

**Gavin Burner** 08:17

One bloke, I said to him, what did you used to do for your first job? He said, I used to work for AMCO ice cream with horse and cart. Horse and cart? Wow. And another person, her husband was a school teacher at Mambray Creek. Wow, this is amazing. I used to camp there as a kid. So, if you listen to other people and their stories, it’s really powerful.

**Carey Scheer** 08:55

One day, a new CEO comes on board, calls Gavin into the office and says, why are we paying you so little? Finally, Gavin gets put on the same award wage as all of his peers. So when you got the award wage, do you think that changed the way you saw yourself?

**Gavin Burner** 09:15

Yes. Everything about life, you’re on the same level as everybody else. So you've got a little bit extra money, you can put things away, you can have a social life. Just like everybody else. And we have a meeting about once a month, you feel like you’re part of having a say because you're getting the same money, you’re equal with everybody else.

**Carey Scheer** 09:44

Gavin got to feel equal for two years. Then a new CEO comes on board. And that's where we started this story. The CEO tells Gavin he must go on a disability supported wage, cutting his wage by nearly ten dollars an hour. The justification for this was that Gavin couldn't read or write. It didn't matter that the main part of his job was driving clients around, spending time with them, setting up activities and tea and listening to them. I wish I could have spoken with some of those clients because I would guess they valued him pretty highly. A support worker so genuinely interested in who they are as people. I doubt they cared about his lack of reading or writing skills. Besides, Gavin did have a workaround. He and his co-workers had an exchange.

**Gavin Burner** 10:37

So I cleaned the vehicles and I, um, check the tyre pressure, check, fill up the diesel, check the oil, whatever tick box. And my coworkers, the ladies I used to work with, they used to help me. Gavin, we got an email, we’ll help you to send it back. So it would have took me five minutes of emails.

**Carey Scheer** 11:07

But this made no difference to the new CEO. So, what did Gavin decide to do? He stayed on and took the pay cut.

**Gavin Burner** 11:17

Nothin’ changed. They just got it cheaper and, that's all. I really hit the gutters, really stopped believing in myself at the time. Yeah, I thought of taking my medication and take it, take it, all of them in one night. I'm still here so I didn't take them. I think that’s probably one of the lowest times of all my life, when they did that.

**Carey Scheer** 12:02

Ten years go by. But during this time Gavin meets people who believe in him and encourage him that he is capable of a lot more. And so, after a decade on a low wage, he goes back into work and he asks…

**Gavin Burner** 12:20

How can I grow? Can I get some, to work myself up, to get more wages. What step do I have to do? And she said she can't do that. And when I said, well can you train me to do something else? No. And the scheme I was under, it was just to keep my job there. I don't like job providers because they don't set it up so you can grow. They employ you, a person with disability, because you're cheaper. I’m better than that. I said to her, I think something in the universe telling me it's time to move on, and this is the right time to do it. And she said a lot of people are looking for jobs, you be grateful that you’ve got a job here. You've got one, so, if you leave, you might not get another job. I knew the universe was telling me something different.

**Laynie Dunne-Heynis** 13:39

Okay, you ready?

**Gavin Burner** 13:39

Yep. We're ready as ready can be.

**Unknown speaker** 13:43

Here come, here come, Laynie and Gavin.

**Laynie Dunne-Heynis** 13:50

Welcome to the intellectual disability and awareness workshop with an employment focus. Gavin and I have worked really closely for a couple of years now running these workshops in particular.

**Gavin Burner** 14:01

I’m a person with a intellectual disability. Things are changing for people with intellectual disability. Like the old days I worked forty cents an hour, now I get proper wages.

**Carey Scheer** 14:14

Gavin was right to listen to the universe. He now has more work coming in than he has time available for. In fact, he even just turned us down at Purple Orange for a job because he's too busy. His main job is working as an Inclusion Advisor for SACID, the South Australian Council of Intellectual Disability. Here he is with his colleague Laynie presenting to a room full of disability job providers. As part of this workshop, Laynie and Gavin use Gavin's story of how a job provider kept Gavin on a supported wage and held him back from growing. Their aim is to stop this from happening to others.

**Laynie Dunne-Heynis** 14:57

Hearing that you've been doing this job with a firm for 12 years. You know, you've had adjustments and worked in a way that has suited you. But now that has changed because the organisation wanted to basically earn a buck off his good work.

**Gavin Burner** 15:13

It really made me not believe in myself. But in the meantime, I'd come to work here. So, I have made my own podcasts. And I have people with, from all around the world have listened to it.

**Laynie Dunne-Heynis** 15:30

From The Sea to the Outback, it's really good actually, it’s on Spotify.

**Gavin Burner** 15:35

It has been my dream to get paid for doing podcasts and I'm about to start.

**Carey Scheer** 15:41

Yes, so Gavin's newest gig is as a podcast creator, and host for the brand new SACID podcast. Where did Gavin pick up those skills? It was at a Purple Orange podcast workshop that I co-taught. Gavin was one of the students. And it was during the same time that he was at work at the community centre on a low wage and being boxed in and prevented to grow. Yet here in the podcast workshop, over the course of eight weeks, he learned to interview people, record audio, import it into a computer, edit it and export a completed story. He now has his own podcast on Spotify. He makes stories all the time. It has a big focus on history and capturing the knowledge of older generations. Please check it out, called From the Sea to the Outback.

**Gavin Burner** 16:39

Why do I do it? Yes, you can work out I love stories about people. But it's a lot more than that. Because I've got a speech, I can't talk properly. So I listen to my podcast, I hear what you hear, then I'll think about how to change it. My words, then I'll go to my speech person and work on those words that need to be there. I need to go and do research before I do the podcasts. So it teaching me about that. And maybe I can go to university, which I am going to Flinders University. And I passed the other day. I got 17 out of 20. So it's more than podcasts.

**Carey Scheer** 17:36

And yes, at 58 years old, Gavin is at uni currently studying Aboriginal culture. Just imagine if Gavin had listened to his job provider and stayed put in a place that had no respect for him. What would Gavin have missed out on? What would the world have missed out on? And what are we missing out on right now because of the way society limits people with disability?

**Gavin Burner** 18:08

Everybody wants to grow. Everybody wants to learn. Everybody can do things, sometimes they gotta do it a different why.

**Belle Owen** 18:23

We're so grateful to Gavin for sharing his powerful story with us so that we could share it with you. If you're interested in being part of the change and you want to create a more disability inclusive workplace, be in touch with Purple Orange and the Road to Employment project. We're always on the lookout for our next story. If you have a story that you would like to share, or have feedback on the podcast, please get in touch with us through Facebook, by emailing us at stories@purpleorange.org.au or by calling 08 8373 8388. Our website is purpleorange.org.au. Join us next time for the Purple Orange podcast where we'll hear from Lily who shares her story of internalised ableism. I’m Belle Owen, thanks for listening.