Episode 6 – Have you thought about a mainstream school?

**SPEAKERS**

Carey Scheer, Belle Owen, Michaela Banks, Harry Banks

**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. I'm your host, Belle Owen, and this is episode six, the final one in our series. This podcast was recorded on Kaurna land. Today's episode focuses on education. Inclusive education is so important to me, because I enrolled at the high school that was local to my area where all my friends are going. It happened to be a two storey high school and because I used a wheelchair, the immediate response was “You will never attend this school. This is not an accessible school, we will never have a lift here, you will never be able to attend.” So, we went on a journey as a family, of meeting with different people with different stakeholders and saying, you know, inclusive education is a right. This is the local school. This is where her friends are going. This is where Belle will go. This happened to me over two decades ago, and still we see the fight continues. That's why I think this episode is so important because it's another family making the case for everyone has a right to inclusive education. Carey Scheer has the story.

**Michaela Banks** 01:16

Growing up in South Africa, often school is quite far away from where you live. You drive to school, you drive back from school.

**Carey Scheer** 01:24

That's Michaela Banks. When she moved to Australia, she noticed it was different.

**Michaela Banks** 01:29

You know, I'd look around and there'd be families walking to school and on their bikes to school and everyone knew each other because you had this strong sense of community where you live, your kids go to the local primary school. And I just love that and really wanted for my children to grow up with that experience that felt like something so beautiful, and so different to what I knew.

**Carey Scheer** 01:55

When Michaela’s first, and at that time, only child, a gorgeous little boy named Harry was 11 months old. Michaela and her fiance Jamie put a deposit down on their first house in a great neighbourhood with a wonderful little Primary School. It was two weeks before their wedding.

**Michaela Banks** 02:16

Yeah, so it was a really crazy, busy, exciting, happy, wonderful time. And I was so excited because my family was coming out from South Africa. I had friends coming out for the wedding. Yeah, it was this incredible moment. And then I received a phone call that changed everything. And heard Harry had had an accident. He wasn't with us at the time. And rushed to the Women's and Children's Hospital. There was a doctor standing over him, she was holding a bag to keep his breathing going and she kept shining a torch in his eyes. And the one thing I remember seeing with these gorgeous chubby little legs, and he still had his Santa nappy on (laughs). I just remember seeing that cute little red Santa nappy. And, so, one of the doctors spoke to me and explained that he had a suspected head injury. And they needed to rush him off at that moment. And as they started leading me out the room, I just said stop, wait, I have to go, I have to go touch him, at least. And so I couldn't go give him a kiss but I just grabbed his little chubby feet and gave his little toes a kiss.

**Carey Scheer** 03:50

Over the next week, Harry's condition stabilised. He was breathing on his own what the future would look like. That was unknown, but Harry would live, and Michaela and Jamie got married.

**Michaela Banks** 04:06

There was something that felt important about us still getting married. We just changed it, and we had a very small little ceremony in the Botanic Gardens. So just a stone's throw from the hospital. And straight after the ceremony we went back to the hospital. I'll never forget the looks; there I was in this rather fabulous wedding dress walking through the Women's and Children's Hospital. I must have looked a sight.

**Carey Scheer** 04:41

Michaela stressed to me that they had a wonderful caring team at the Women's and Children's Hospital. She's very grateful to them. But, in all of that good, there was one truly awful encounter. A medical professional who was not part of Harry's core team declared three devastating predictions for Harry's future.

**Michaela Banks** 05:06

He said to us “well, Harry won’t attend a mainstream school. Harry won't be able to communicate. And Harry won't be able to understand spoken language.” And I was just so, I mean, those three statements are just burned in my memory. And I just felt completely lost and terrified for my little boy. And what this meant for him.

**Carey Scheer** 05:42

Michaela’s dream of that local primary school experience for Harry slipped away. But Harry got out of hospital and eventually went back to childcare.

**Michaela Banks** 05:54

There’s no segregated childcare. So he went to beautiful childcare centre. He was so wonderfully included. You know, the educators, they applied for some extra funding so that they had additional support for Harry. But really, he was just like every other little kid there getting filthy in the sandpit, you know, he'd come home covered in paint, filthy, it was absolutely wonderful, just how every young child's experience of childcare or, you know, being a little person should be. And then it was time for Kindy. And again, you know, there's not really any special Kindy’s available. So we chose a beautiful Kindy that was close to us and Harry absolutely loved it. The kids played with him and included him.

**Carey Scheer** 06:51

But from here out, Harry's path would diverge from his friends, they would go to their mainstream schools, and Harry would go off to a special school.

**Michaela Banks** 07:01

I was sitting here at home, we were having a speech session with our speech pathologist. And she said to me, where are you sending Harry to school?

**Carey Scheer** 07:12

Makayla told her the closest special school, of course.

**Michaela Banks** 07:18

And I'm thinking, why is she asking me this? Where else can Harry go to school? And she said, Hmm, have you thought about a mainstream school? And I just absolutely hadn't, it felt like that option was off the table for us. That's something, it just, there was this little spark in that moment and I will always be so grateful to her for asking me that question. Because that was the question that changed everything for us. And I suddenly thought, huh, okay, maybe mainstream is an option for him, maybe anything is an option for him, hang on a second. This whole time I've been thinking I don't want to put restrictions on my child, and that has got his start with where he goes to school. I had to acknowledge and work through my own sense of ableism and how me growing up at a school that definitely never had children with disabilities, and my assumption that children with disabilities went to segregated schools. Suddenly as the parent of a child with disability, I had some serious questions around those assumptions, and so I chose to actively work through and unpack that.

**Carey Scheer** 08:54

And so Michaela sought out wisdom from people with firsthand experience of disability, how did they see the world and she also delved into research on inclusive education. What she found really surprised her.

**Michaela Banks** 09:10

You know, at the time, it was 40 years of research, but I guess now it's 50 years of research shows that there are social benefits and huge academic benefits to disabled and non-disabled children to be in inclusive schooling together. And that not one research article favours segregation over inclusion. It gave me a feeling of power and certainty that this was the right choice.

**Carey Scheer** 09:43

And so Mikayla picked up the phone and dial the school and said.

**Michaela Banks** 09:49

Hi, my name is Michaela. My son starts school next year, and I'd like some information about enrolling him. He has a disability and there's just this pause. And she says, Oh, are you sure? So are you in our zone? Are we your zone school? And I say, No, but he goes to childcare nearby. I don't think then we aren't your school, you need to contact the school that you're in the zone for. Okay. Right. So that is a no. Onto this next school on my list.

**Carey Scheer** 10:29

The next school's response.

**Michaela Banks** 10:31

Oh, so do you know, we don't have a unit? There's a school around the corner, they have a unit. I'm like, no, I wasn't calling about the unit. I was calling about your school. Oh, are you sure? Never mind, I said, I'll call another time. And I remember at the time just thinking just don't even let it set in, don't let the doubt or the fear set in, just go, just call them pick up the phone, go again.

**Carey Scheer** 10:58

She called a third school.

**Michaela Banks** 11:01

Oh, I don't think I was breathing. I was so tense. And the woman on the phone said, Sure, no problem. We'll make a time for you meet the principal. Oh, thank goodness, okay. It's all gonna be great. We're meeting the principal. This is how it should be, great. So we go into the principal's office, we sit down, and Harry comes over. He's standing next to me in his walker. And completely unprompted on his talker, he just says, nice to meet you. And I was so proud of him in that moment. So I look over the principal because I am just overflowing with pride. And he sits back in his chair. He had an open book in front of him that he closes, he crosses his arms. And he then proceeds to tell us how in his 25 years of experience, he has found that children and parents of children with disabilities are so much happier at segregated schools. And would we like a tour of the school? So I said, No, thanks. We'll go. I don't want Harry to have to hear any more of that or be a part of that, and we left.

I thought that this was a real option and yet, everyone and all my experiences now keep telling me that I'm wrong about this. And yet, why do I feel so strongly that this is the right thing? And how do we make this happen and not just force a school to want him? I want Harry to go to school where he is valued, where people know that Harry is funny, and clever, and social and cheeky. And not just the disabled kid who is too hard to deal with. Jamie said to me one evening, “so should we just call a local primary school?” And in all this turmoil of calling schools and being rejected by this principal, I hadn't even called the school that, we have bought our house so that our children could go to the school so that we were in the zone, and I realise now that I was so terrified of being rejected by them, that I completely avoided contacting them.

**Carey Scheer** 13:38

This really was Michaela’s dream. And if Harry was rejected here, what was that saying?

**Michaela Banks** 13:44

What is the message to every other little kid in our neighbourhood. They get to go to our local school, that Harry does not belong there because of his disability, and I simply don't believe that.

**Carey Scheer** 13:58

Michaela parked her fear, and rang the local school. And they invited her in to meet the principal.

**Michaela Banks** 14:06

I remember not feeling as excited as I had previously. Because, you know, I had been there before, we'd still been rejected afterwards. I just was not going to get my hopes up. So the day comes, Jamie, Harry, and I go in to meet her. She spoke directly to Harry. And you know, at this time, Harry didn't have his amazing little nice to meet you moment, but it didn't matter. She was just happy to have us there and said that they would love to have Harry at their school. They hadn't had a student quite like Harry before. But she believes in good communication and she'd be willing to work with us and to build a strong relationship and we would make sure that Harry has a great schooling experience. I remember all through it just trying to be cool, and just stay really calm. And then we say goodbye to her and we walked out to the parking lot, and I just burst into tears.

**Carey Scheer** 15:21

That was six years ago. Harry is now 12. And in his final year of primary school, Harry, do you like school?

**Harry Banks** 15:30

I like going to school. My favourite part of school is seeing my friends. They make me happy.

**Carey Scheer** 15:38

You're about to go to high school soon. Do you have any fear about going to high school?

**Harry Banks** 15:46

Yeah, what are the teachers going to be like? I hope they listen to me.

**Carey Scheer** 15:50

Harry communicates in a variety of ways. The answers you just heard were on Harry's iPad talker. He pre-prepared all those answers himself. It takes him a little time to type them out. So he asked for the questions ahead of time. He uses the iPad when he wants to communicate complex thoughts. And he also uses it with pre-programmed phrases and questions that he says regularly. He tends to use his pod book for more in-the-moment, spontaneous conversation. So I asked him to show me how that works. Being a curious kid, he signed back in response. If you show me how that, pointing to my audio recorder, works.

Here, do you want to hear? I'll put the head headphones on you. So, it just records the audio. It captures your voice in here.

**Harry Banks** 16:46

Yeah, yeah.

**Carey Scheer** 16:47

Okay, show me how this works.

**Harry Banks** 16:49

Let's do that.

**Carey Scheer** 16:50

Harry flips through his pod book until he gets to Okay, Google. And then motions to his mom.

**Michaela Banks** 16:58

Okay, Google. (yeah) yeah. What do you say? What do you want to say to Okay, Google.

**Carey Scheer** 17:03

And then he flips through the pod book until he gets to a

**Michaela Banks** 17:07

(Harry laughs) Fart? from Google?

**Harry Banks** 17:11

Yeah.

**Michaela Banks** 17:12

(Michaela laughs) Okay, Google, make a fart noise. (Google: This is a fart)

**Harry Banks** 17:22

that's sick. You stink. Seriously.

**Michaela Banks** 17:28

Seriously. Well that’s definitely going in the radio story. You know, Harry had just started saying a few words. I think he had mama, baba, dada at the time of his accident. And when I was told that Harry wouldn't be able to communicate I just thought, well, I know, I can tell him that I love him. But is he ever gonna be able to say that back to me? And he can and he does. And, you know, tell fart jokes. Who realised how important that was going to be in the future.

**Carey Scheer** 18:05

The fart jokes are important because, well, what kid doesn't love a good fart joke. But also, it proves just how wrong and limiting that one medical professional's views of Harry's future were. Harry communicates, he's funny, he tells jokes, he learns, he grows. And he belongs in his local community school with his neighbourhood friends.

**Michaela Banks** 18:36

I was scared that the older Harry got, the bigger the gap would become between him and his friends. And it was really interesting. I was chatting to, to one of my mum friends recently, and I mentioned this fear to her and her son is in Harry's class and they've been together at school since reception. She was really surprised to hear this. “Oh, really? I feel it's gone the other way.” I feel that she was saying how she hears her son talking more about Harry now, and that they're interacting more now than he ever did before. They’re understanding more about how to communicate with him. Because the reality is communicating with someone who has a communication disability. You need some patience, you need to give Harry time to respond to use his talker. And the kids as they're getting older are understanding that now. And in fact, my hope is, maybe that'll actually bring them closer together.

**Carey Scheer** 19:42

Harry's classmates get the opportunity to develop patience and listening skills. And isn't the world better off for that?

**Belle Owen** 19:56

At Purple Orange, we advocate for inclusive education because we know that benefits all students. We reject segregation in all settings. And you know, the world is a diverse place and so that should be reflected in the classroom. If you'd like further information on inclusive education, including our free workshops for students, teachers and parents, visit our website at www.purpleorange.org.au. This brings us to the end of our six part series, but we're already on the lookout for next season stories. So if you have something that you would like to share, be in touch. You can get in touch with us on Facebook by emailing stories@purpleorange.org.au or by calling (08) 8373 8388. I'm Belle Owen and thanks for listening.