Purple Orange Podcast, Season 2, Episode 2:

Breaking out of the safe zone

**SPEAKERS**

Belle Owen (host), Carey Scheer (interviewer and narrator), Matt Shilcock (guest)

**Belle Owen** 00:00

Hello and welcome to the Purple Orange Podcast. I'm Belle Owen. As a disabled woman, I can tell you there are many things in society I want to change. I want better access. I want to reliably be able to get a taxi without waiting forever. I want to be able to go to a restaurant without having to spend an hour researching if I can get in the door, use the bathroom or move around the tables. I want to be included and not discriminated against in all areas of life. Today's story, however, isn't about changing society. It's about something that you, I and everyone has the power to change, and that is oneself. The second episode in our season is about getting out of the comfort of the safety zone and facing fears in order to truly live. It's a strong reminder that while we work on changing the world, we can and should still live fulfilling and meaningful lives rather than waiting for life to happen. And the more we better ourselves, the more we can give back to changing the world. Carey Scheer brings us the story.

**Carey Scheer** 01:07

When Matt Shilcock finished high school, he wanted to learn a martial art.

**Matt Shilcock** 01:11

Ninjutsu, because, you know, Ninjitsu, Ninja Turtles, brilliant.

**Carey Scheer** 01:18

It took him a whole two years of reading and thinking about it, before ringing a Ninjutsu to school.

**Matt Shilcock** 01:25

I think it was like a 10, maybe a 15 minute answering machine message that you listen to. And it's like, you know, this is the most dangerous martial art style in the world. We train with real live weapons. You will not be trained at this school if you have a history of violence or if you have a criminal record or if you have mental health issues. And I was like, oh, okay, this sounds really serious. And so I listened to this thing. I take some notes, and I leave my details.

**Carey Scheer** 01:59

The school rang Matt back.

**Matt Shilcock** 02:01

He actually laughed on the phone and he's like, "No, what are you even thinking?" In a way he was like, "What's wrong with you? Like, why would you want to do this?" I felt a bit silly, because I was sort of like, well, you're right. I know what my limitations is, I have been breaking bones for 20 years. This is a pretty stupid thing for me to do.

**Carey Scheer** 02:37

Matt has Osteogenesis Imperfecta. It's commonly known as brittle bones disease. He told me he has no first recollection of breaking a bone.

**Matt Shilcock** 02:48

Yeah, that's like asking me what's the first memory of brushing your teeth. It's just kind of my normal in a way.

**Carey Scheer** 02:54

Matt's early childhood was largely spent alone at home on the couch watching daytime TV, he was either healing from a broken bone, or hiding away from the world trying not to break another one.

**Matt Shilcock** 03:08

Because I would break things so often, I'd take a lot of time off school, so I never really got a chance to develop a lot of proper meaningful relationships. Yeah, being a little bit socially isolated, made me quite withdrawn as a person as well. And so, a bit of a vicious cycle where, you know, I wouldn't fit in and so then I become more withdrawn and probably be a bit of a prick because of that. And then people wouldn't want to be associated with me because I'm a bit of a prick, and then that would make me more withdrawn and then dadadada.... so yeah, I was quite isolated as a child.

**Carey Scheer** 03:47

The result of this isolation made him feel like life was something that happened to others, not him.

**Matt Shilcock** 03:58

It was such a weird disconnect. Everything, even the mundane things, felt so surreal. Even when I was at school, I never felt like I was actually at school, if that makes sense, because life was just the thing I did between breaking bones and then healing from broken bones was just the thing I was doing while I waited for life to start and I never sort of felt like life was actually going anywhere. I didn't feel like there was any point in having ambitions or thinking about what I wanted to do when I grew up because it's like, well, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" Well probably I'm just going to be doing this. Life just felt really like a drag. It's like, there has to be something coming that's not sitting on the couch watching daytime television.

**Carey Scheer** 05:00

Matt came to realise he couldn't wait for change to come. He would have to create it. He saw High School as his fresh start.

**Matt Shilcock** 05:10

Well, it sort of felt freeing. It's like, nobody's gonna know who I am. So, this is an opportunity for me to make friends, to be more confident to be less scared.

**Carey Scheer** 05:23

He couldn't change his bones. He couldn't change the fact that he'd likely need time off school to heal from injuries. But he could change his attitude while he was at school.

**Matt Shilcock** 05:34

I definitely forced myself to be a bit more outgoing, rather than like, you know, sit at the back of the classroom and be quiet, I would sort of join into conversations or would join into a joke. Not always successfully, of course, but just making that effort just sort of make me more of a person rather than just, you know, the disabled kid in the corner.

**Carey Scheer** 06:03

Matt joined the cross-country team.

**Matt Shilcock** 06:07

That would just be like going down to the river after school and just running laps or something like that, me pushing laps in my wheelchair. And like everybody else training to do like a cross-country race, I was just training to be a part of it.

**Carey Scheer** 06:24

He also got involved with the school's games.

**Matt Shilcock** 06:28

We had like dramatic games of chess and basketball, and you know you'd go between the schools. It was cool. I was never playing any sports, but still, I'd be, I think the first year I was involved, I was involved in chess and debating. When I was more involved later on, I was doing things like dramatic games, do a bit of improv and make a scene and stuff like that.

**Carey Scheer** 06:50

Life wasn't perfect. But high school was a big step towards something. And after graduation, this fear of slipping backwards, pushed him to seek something new, and that's where Ninjutsu came in.

**Matt Shilcock** 07:03

Yeah, I think the masculinity of that as well. Like, I'm a young guy, I'm overcompensating in the world. I'm trying to like: "Yeah, I'm a man! I’m a man who does martial arts."

**Carey Scheer** 07:17

There were only three Ninjutsu schools in Adelaide. As you know, the first school laughed at him. After he asked if having brittle bones disease would be a problem. He left a message for the second school asking that same question. They never returned his call. For the third school, he decided to try a slightly different approach.

**Matt Shilcock** 07:39

I leaded in with this like, "Hey, look, man, I've got brittle bones. And I'm really interested in trying a martial art. And I'm interested in Ninjitsu because, one, it's exciting. Ninjas are cool. And two, it's like, there's a lot of adaptation." And I think because I’d gone at that angle, my third guy, Gary, was like, "Yeah, that's really interesting. Let's try this. Let's see what we can do. Let's work with this. We train on Wednesdays and Fridays, come along to lesson one time, have a look and see if you're into it." Now I was shitting myself, because I was like, okay, cool. I made the phone call, now I’ve actually got to do it. And so like, yeah, I felt heaps nervous. I had absolutely no idea what I'm getting myself into. And I'm just riding this 20 or 30 minute bus ride to get to the place, and I am like, I could just get off and not go. But at the same time, I was excited because I'm like, I'm about to do something that is going to be life changing. I feel like this is going to give me skills that I need to not feel so fragile and scared all the time.

**Carey Scheer** 09:09

Matt got to the gym; the owner comes over to have a chat.

**Matt Shilcock** 09:12

There was no mollycoddling at all. He pretty much said to me, I expect you to take care of your own body. And I'm going to trust you to say if anything, if you feel weird about anything, or if you, you know, to not take too many risks, but at the same time, I'm looking forward to seeing how we can make things work with you and to have someone trust me to have that autonomy over my body and to be like, I'm going to trust you to know what's too much or know what's not enough. Whereas I'd spent so long being like “oh, I don't think you should do that.” From hearing that from people and, you know, wrapped up in cotton wool. And of course, it comes from a place of love like you want the best for that person but at the same time, it's stifling.

**Carey Scheer** 10:04

Over the next five years, Matt works himself up to a brown belt,

**Matt Shilcock** 10:08

And surprisingly, I never injured myself on the mat.

**Carey Scheer** 10:12

Matt attributes this to the countless hours he spent learning the art of falling. Something he spent his whole life in absolute terror of.

**Matt Shilcock** 10:27

And there is a real philosophical part of it as well. Like, you call your falling and your rolling techniques Ukemi. In Japanese, that means receiving, so it's like you're receiving the ground. And just that change in how I thought about falling, instead of falling like oh no, I'm gonna hit the ground, like, no, I'm going to receive the ground. And it becomes this, like, the ground is just a friend. It's just a tool that I can use as well, and that was awesome. I really threw myself into it. I’d do my warmups every day and practice all the time. It was more than a hobby, it was this vehicle to confidence really. It made me feel like I had a purpose. And it also helped me to feel not so weak and lost in the world.

**Carey Scheer** 11:31

Today, Matt's not immersed in Ninjutsu as he once was, before he went for his black belt, he broke his pelvis in an incident totally unrelated to martial arts. It was a long recovery. And as part of that, Matt started dancing and it became a new passion. And he actually went on to become a professional dancer with Restless dance. Matt's now onto yet another chapter. He works in digital marketing and he's also trying to launch a platform called Accessible Me. It's a platform where the disability community can review disability equipment. He said, it's about putting the power back into their hands. Even though Matt's not regularly practicing martial arts today, its lessons have stayed with him.

**Matt Shilcock** 12:21

I had this whole poem that was kinda like a code that these monks used to live by. There was a few lines, where it's like, my tools are everything that exists and how you choose to have a relationship with that object is- just like the floor, you know it exists whether you're scared of it, or you accept it, it still exists. So, your relationship to it is based on you. There was another line that was like, my strength is my adaptability or something like that. And it was like, that really resonated strongly with me, because you’ve got to adapt all the time. And then to think about that, as less of this is what I have to do, oh, I have to drive this thing, because you know, I'm a cripple. But then, to suddenly think about, like, no, this is my strength, this is my superpower. I do these things differently, because they make me stronger, and it just stopped me thinking about things in terms of like, what normal people are doing and what I have to do. You know, it's all just a playing field, and this is just how I use this thing to achieve this task.

**Carey Scheer** 13:45

Matt's changed a lot from the scared kid on the couch glued to the TV, and Ninjitsu’s played a huge role. But it all started, when Matt decided he was capable of change, before entering high school.

**Matt Shilcock** 14:01

This feeling of change and this decision of change was really important. It was something, I didn't realise as much at that time, and looking back on it, I realise it more, but it was really a pivotal moment where I was really making a decision to not be a victim. And, yeah, I think that's such an important thing for anyone to do. You've always got your own problems. And you've also always got your own strengths as well. Heck, it sucks having brittle bones and it sucks being in pain a lot, but at the same time, yeah, it makes me really adaptable. And that's a really great skill that I can bring to a team. Also, just objectively having a disability means that I'm eligible for certain grants and things like that. So that's a useful resource as well. Things are as good as they are as bad and it's just making, making the most of the cards in your hand and what you got.

**Belle Owen** 15:25

We thank Matt Shilcock for sharing this powerful story of change. Do you need to shake life up and get out of your comfort zone? What can you do today to face your fear? We'd love to hear about it. Find us on social media or send us an email; stories@purpleorange.org.au. This story was made by Carey Scheer for The Purple Orange Podcast, and I'm your host, Belle Owen. We're committed to bringing you first person stories from the disability community. Do you have an idea for our podcast? What topics do you want to explore? Get in touch with us at stories@purpleorange.org.au or visit our website www.purpleorange.org.au