

## I WILL NOT BE DEFINED OR CONFINED BY MY DISABILITY Address by Milly Parker at the 2007 Yooralla AGM

How lovely to be here.

### **My Background**

In 1992 I was 21 when I was involved in a car accident.

I was resuscitated & intubated at the scene & airlifted to emergency at The Alfred Hospital.

The next thing I can recall was waking up several days later in intensive care on a life support machine. My only form of communication was by pointing at letters on a board to form words that those around me had to write down. I remember pointing out on the board "tell the girls I will be home in time for next weekend's Grand Final Party".

I had no idea what the years ahead held for me.

I was later diagnosed with an Acquired Brain Injury & attended rehab in Bendigo at the Anne Caudle Center for the next year.

My life changed so dramatically. I went from being an extroverted, 21 year old Accounting student with a social life that would rival any Hollywood Starlet, to being too afraid to cross the road on my own, virtually overnight.

I was unable to return to study as I now had trouble with memory, retaining new information, attention span, complex planning etc

For years following the accident constant reference was made as to how I could no longer do this or that. I suffered debilitating depression for many years as hearing all the things that I couldn't do over a period of years brain washed me into thinking that I was broken, useless & worthless.

Which I now demonstrate clearly is not the case!

In fact I often say "Thank God" for my Brain Injury or I could be an Accountant right now.

Apologies to any accountants out there.

Fast forward past many disastrous attempts at finding or keeping jobs, which included a stint as a tour guide in an Historical Theatre in Bendigo. Can you imagine a person with a Brain Injury who has problems remembering & retaining new information in charge of a Tour Group?

Now I tell you it was a bit like an episode of "Thank God you're here" as I would forget all the Historical facts & make up my own!

So if ever you were part of my tour group I apologise!

I also realize now how vulnerable I was.

I was so desperate to work & when the idea about making Dog Biscuits at home entered my head & I thought all my prayers had been answered.

I am told by my beloved partner Tony that I came up with the name HAPPY YAPPERS after a few red wines, but I don't recall that – perhaps one too many red wines!

Being able to work from home solved all the problems that surfaced when I would try other jobs -

- my fatigue/migraine problems, I could go to bed & rest if I was tired or unwell
- I can get up at 3.30am & start working
- I can work in a quiet environment on my own,
- I can use the internet to research,
- the phone to call Pet shops
- & I don't have to leave the house!
- I don't feel the enormous pressure to offer Employers a Health consistency that I cannot even offer myself,
- Anything that I had trouble with i.e. numbers & logistics can be and is delegated.
- The work environment is modified to work around me!

I started making the biscuits & with encouragement from the local Pet shop, we sold them at his store.

To this day - I will never forget the feeling of him purchasing \$15 worth of HAPPY YAPPERS.

I rocked up to his store with my pooch Riley, Mum's Tupperware container & my best china for them to sit on in his store, I was so proud.

It made me smile on the inside in a way that I hadn't done for years!

Becoming a contributing member of society again in a role *that I was happy with* has been one of the major reasons for my happiness today.

Employment was so important to me; it has given me back my self worth.

We now have been operating for the past 5 years & at this moment our 6<sup>th</sup> shipment since last November of HAPPY YAPPERS is on its way to HARROD's in London, we are about to go into Japan & Taiwan & of course we sell nationally.

The lovely thing is that HAPPY YAPPERS wouldn't exist if it weren't for my brain Injury!

HAPPY YAPPERS is a joyous, noisy celebration of my love for dogs & of who I am today because of my Brain Injury.

In fact my brain injury is an asset!

For instance having a short attention span is great for coming up with ideas... In fact I can't stop coming up with ideas. A Marketing Executive actually once called me a creative genius!

Now that might be going a bit too far but it just goes to show that its all about perspective.

## ***Barriers***

The biggest barriers that I have faced with my particular disability have been attitudes about my disability & Acquired Brain Injury.

One of the comments that I very often get is – “but you look alright” my immediate comment to them is “does that mean that you would treat me differently if I was in a wheelchair?”

These people are not horrible people, they are trying to be polite.

But it's just not good enough any more. In fact it can get really tiring at times.

Access to information in a format that I could understand is another barrier that comes to mind.

When trying to export my biscuits to HARROD's & expressing my frustration with a particular Federal Organization, the chap in charge asked me if I had told the people that I was dealing with that I was intellectually impaired.

Did he even know what that meant? So that would that explain all my exporting problems?

He then went on to say did I want to speak to a friend of his that was in a wheelchair & in business – nothing to do with export!

Now again this guy wasn't a bad bloke but just had no idea on how to deal with a person with a disability.

Another person also asked me to do a 5 week fulltime course on exporting,  
When –

1. I did have a business to run
  2. I said that I had learning & reading difficulties & it would be a waste of my time.
- They then sent me 55 page document to read. Go figure that one.

I am very open about having a brain injury & very up front about it. That is my choice. I am proud of who I am &, along with being a business person, a partner, a daughter etc, I happen to have a brain injury.

My life is worth no more nor is it worth less because of my disability.

I am a mentally strong person willing to think laterally to reach my potential. I want to help society as a whole see the value in everyone with disabilities, including the extremely vulnerable that cannot look after themselves & that we as a community must protect.

I do not want to be patronized.

I do not want sympathy.

I will continue to chase dreams & achieve my goals.

I will not be defined or confined by my Disability.

Thank you.