

The ability to explore.....

by Paul Edwards

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Yooralla chairman Bruce Bonyhady ensures his wheelchair-bound sons experience life "outside our society". But he also wants radical disability support reform at a local level.

Scottish singer Susan Boyle sums up her experience of disability rather well. "I was slightly brain-damaged at birth, and I want people like me to see that they shouldn't let a disability get in the way. I want to turn my disability into ability."

Millions of records and dollars later, Susan Boyle has proved her point. But what happens if you can't sing?

If you become disabled at work, you're probably covered for life; similarly, if you acquire a disability in a car with Victorian number plates. But there are thousands of Victorians with disability who are doing it tough, without an insurance blanket to cover them.

Like Susan Boyle, Bruce Bonyhady also dreams a dream. As chairman of Yooralla, Victoria's largest disability support provider, he wants a national disability insurance scheme, a proposed no-fault insurance plan for people who are born with, or acquire, a disability.

He co-authored a submission which was accepted as a 'Big Idea' at the Australia 2020 Summit in 2008 and he has continued to spread the idea across a broad section of the community.

Bruce became chairman of Yooralla in 2003. He is now on an independent panel advising the Productivity Commission Inquiry into a national long-term care and support scheme for people with disabilities. He's also president of Philanthropy Australia.

Bruce still has time for family life. One son Simon is a keen amateur footballer, while Bruce loves to travel with wife Rae and other sons Mike and Greg, even if it's just to a Collingwood game.

And that's not always easy, and it explains a lot about this charitable powerhouse. Mike and Greg have ataxic cerebral palsy, which means they need wheelchairs to get around.

"I became aware of Yooralla when Michael was born," Bruce says. "Within a few years he was in an early intervention service - a system from Hungary I helped to trial. It encourages levels of independence in all aspects of daily life.

"Once I became involved, I started to see how much was needed to improve the lives of thousands of people. There are big discrepancies - get bashed in the street and initially you'll receive first-class hospital treatment and rehab, but then you might spend the rest of your life in an aged-care nursing home.

"Get severely injured in a road accident in Victoria and you're covered for life. But if you're born with a disability or acquire something like multiple sclerosis, you're going to rely on your family until they collapse with exhaustion.

"We should recognise disability can strike anyone at any time and should have a national insurance scheme. It would give peace of mind to all Victorians."

Yooralla is an advocate for people with disability and has made their life easier by establishing the Yooralla Holiday and Travel Service. The body organises holidays for about 60 people a year, some in groups, others individually with a carer.

People with disabilities planning a holiday anywhere in the world can use Yooralla and get information on wheelchair accessible holiday options for Australia and overseas, together with assistance in seeking funding for carer costs.

"It has been a tremendous joy for Rae and me to take Mike and Greg to some wonderful places," Bruce says. "France is at the top of the list, and a place very dear to my heart. As a family we have toured by train and by car - and always by wheelchair."

Bruce says disabilities need not be a barrier and contends it is vitally important that people travel outside their immediate society. Unless we experience how other nations live and how other societies function, he says, we can't make the world a better place.

"People who travel sensibly with open minds are bound to help make the world a better place."