

Peter Darch, West Australian Young Person of the Year for 2011, made the following address to the National Press Club, Canberra - November 2011

Gday. My life changed when I was 16. At the time I was living with my four younger brothers in Mandurah, about an hour south of Perth. I was playing four sports a week, I wasn't interested in school and I was planning on becoming a cray fisherman. I saw myself moving north, skippering a boat, fishing, having a pretty chilled out lifestyle.

Something that was drama free. I hadn't thought of marriage, I hadn't thought of having a family and I definitely hadn't thought of disability. The old Mandurah Bridge is an icon of my town and my brothers and I jumped off it 15,000 times and that's an understatement I can tell you.

On 3 January 2002 though, I took my last jump. I landed perfectly fine but I lost concentration and I swam into the path of my friend who jumped on top of my head from the top of the bridge. I knew straight away that I was completely stuffed because I was face down, floating with my arms out in front of me, wondering why they weren't helping me out. I immediately lost all movement and feeling in my arms and legs and I was like a head without a body.

My brother had done first aid and immediately acted to keep me still and save me from drowning; something which saved my life. His actions prevented the spinal cord from further damage at a higher level, affectively saving me from losing the ability to breathe. Without his forward thinking I would have been left ventilated, much the same as Christopher Reeve or possibly worse.

Unfortunately I think all we hear about with disability are the sob stories and about how bad it is and now I understand why. Lying in the water that day, what instantly flashed through my mind was, this is it, my life's over, there's going to be no jobs, there's going to be no Mrs, no future, everything's done. It took about two days of feeling sorry for myself in intensive care until I made the conscience decision that there was no point moping around; that it was time to just get on with it and get sorted out, and fortunately for me, my fantastic family had the same attitude.

But and it's a big but getting sorted wasn't that easy. In fact despite my will to succeed, it was incredibly difficult, partly because I didn't receive compensation.

Mandurah is a small town and while they did do some community fundraising to help my family out, basically with house modifications, that couldn't provide me with care. Except for Silver Chain getting me up in the mornings, we had no support in the home until three years later. So it was up to my mum, my dad and my brothers to do it all; feed me, showering, toileting, putting me to bed, everything. Being around me became a job and my family were forced to help me with personal care tasks that made them feel uncomfortable because they were

family. And you could imagine a family of four brothers, some things are best left untouched.

I didn't have Feebie, my beautiful Assistance Dog Australia service dog, until many years later. So if there wasn't anyone at home, I couldn't get anything, I couldn't get a drink, I couldn't get any food.

All that work took a toll on my family's backs and it took a toll on them. It meant mum couldn't go to work. Dad had his own business so at times when she couldn't be there, he'd have to cancel jobs and lose money to come home and knowing how much

my family were already doing, there was times I chose to go without because I just simply wouldn't want to ask for things to save them the burden.

The crayfishing dream was obviously not going to happen because in a chair you're not really good at pulling ropes so I went back to school, back to uni and I got a psych degree. I eventually landed a job with the City of Mandurah as a youth development officer. In this position I helped to build a sense of community to develop confidence and to nurture leadership skills for young people. Something I love.

I've also now registered as a psychologist and I work up to 50 hours a week. I have the knowledge; I design the programs and the projects; I deliver them and I'm ultimately responsible for their success.

But I need assistance on the physical side. I can't get things from the printer. I can't write the addresses on mail outs. I can't set up rooms for meetings and I can't travel alone.

The arrangement works and I can proudly sit here as the 2011 West Australian Young Person of the Year and 2011 West Australian Most Outstanding Youth Worker to prove it. But this is where things get crazy. I've gotten to where I am on unsustainable surplus funds and goodwill. I'm only entitled to 10 hours assistance at work which leaves me with not enough support to be able to do the job. And this is the crazy part. If I resign tomorrow, I'd be eligible for up to 40 hours of support to take part in activities that I consider a waste of time for someone with my potential, going bowling or fishing. Anything but go to work. I've lobbied for two and a half years to get this fixed.

If I were able to choose how to utilise the funding and received enough funding, I could increase my employment support worker assistance. It would be a sustainable long term solution. The additional tax that the support worker and I would pay plus the Disability Support Pension expense saved would mean the Government would actually make money. It's a classic winwin that everyone I've talked to can see but so far nothing's happened.

Under an NDIS though, no one would have any of the problems I've mentioned, because it would be about getting the care you need when and when when and where you need it. And importantly having control over where that money's spent. I'd be entitled to my support. I wouldn't have to compete with other people with disabilities to cry and to beg and to see who's the most desperate and that's how funding's currently accessed.

And imagine what I could do with all the energy that the constant struggling takes out of me. It would mean that I'd know my job was ongoing, that I could pay my mortgage, I could make plans for a future family with my wife and I could move towns or states and pursue a career in whichever direction it might take me because the funding would go with, and that's why I am here today. That's why I'll keep talking up the national disability insurance scheme until we see it in action and that's why I'm asking everyone to sign up to the campaign to stand alongside me a bit of a funny one there and for everyone to keep the momentum going.

So cheers for listening to my speech today. Thanks.