

The answer is ours to discover ...

by Anthea Lema

As I start to write this article, I reflect back on the last few years with a mixture of feelings, some that leave me with a degree of sadness and others that fill my heart with joy and hope.

The feelings of sadness are not related to having a son, Cameron, with a disability, but rather from listening to people who said that his life would be limited at best and more likely to be a burden on his family, friends and community. This sadness is there because we fell into the trap of believing that others would have the answers and solutions to issues that would arise in our future. It took some years to realise that the answers and solutions come from us, his family, his friends and those around him that love and care for him as an important part our lives. The kind of life that was being mapped out for him by others was totally devoid of typical experiences that our other children would enjoy and that led to a degree of hopelessness and loss of control over our own lives.

I am very pleased to say that the sadness I felt is quickly being replaced with feelings of hope, joy and optimism for the future.

Maybe I should tell you a little bit about my family. My husband and I both have children from previous marriages ranging in age from 16 to 26. We are also privileged to have one daughter of our own who is almost three years old. All of our children bring us great joy and like all children can bring challenges to our lives as well. Cameron falls somewhere in the middle of our crew. He is 18 years old, has many talents and a quirky personality. Cameron also has a number of challenges in his life that requires intentional planning in order to overcome them.

Martin Luther King was famously quoted for having a dream. Well, five years ago I also had a dream. A dream that Cameron might one day have his own business when he finished school, a dream that many said would never happen. Well, it is the end of 2008, Cameron is 18 years old and he is about to leave school to start work in his very own business: 'Cam-Can & Associates'.

'Cam-Can & Associates' didn't happen overnight and we owe a lot of thanks to a number of people who have been an integral part of our planning for Cameron's future. One of those people is Eddie Bartnik. Some of you may know Eddie as the person that led LAC for many years, others may know him as the person who introduced the notion of PLAN (now known as PIN) to Western Australia and still others may know Eddie as the person that introduced Microboards to WA. The introduction of Microboards was timely in our planning journey. We thank Eddie very much for his commitment to improving the lives of people with disabilities in this state.

What is a Microboard I hear you ask? Well when I first heard the word, I like many others thought it had something to do with computers, perhaps some new technocratic way of assessing what people need, maybe a new way of negating the need to know the person and their situation.

Nothing could be further from the truth. A Microboard is a small (micro) group of committed family and friends (board) who join with a person who has life challenges, to create a non-profit community board. Microboards are premised on the need to have an intimate knowledge of the person for whom the Microboard has been established. The Microboard supports the person in planning for a good life and to achieve their goals, dreams and wishes.

The person is the centre of the Microboard, and every decision reflects the person's goals, dreams, needs and desires. The Microboard also helps the wider community to have a relationship with the person, and to benefit from their contribution. You can find out more by visiting the Vela Microboards Australia website <http://www.microboard.org.au/>

Cameron's Microboard was established approximately 12 months ago. The Microboard consists of nine amazing people, approximately half are Cameron's family and we are delighted to say that the other half are Cameron's friends. These people recognise the challenges Cameron faces and are committed to ensuring he has the best opportunity to lead a typical life.

Cameron's Microboard meets regularly and has spent many hours actively working together on various aspects associated with his life. The Microboard members provide this assistance because they have a strong belief that Cameron can live a rich and productive life. They ask for no payment nor personal benefit to do this work. They come together with a common bond with Cameron and have a fundamental belief that support for Cameron needs to start with his personal community rather than looking to others for solutions to the challenges that he faces.

At this point I feel that I need to explain how profoundly proud we are to be able to say that Cameron has a number of people in his life that he can call - friend. Cameron has many strengths but he also has a number of challenges that has made the establishment of natural friendship particularly difficult. I'm always guarded in being critical of the formal service system however; I think it's reasonable to say that THE SYSTEM played a significant role in creating the barriers to natural relationships in Cameron's life. Cameron was segregated at an early age with segregated schooling having a profound impact on his life. Segregating vulnerable people from ordinary life experiences and disguising this strategy as special or individualised guarantees continued isolation.

Many things have happened as a result of establishing Cameron's Microboard. One of the major developments has been creating Cameron's business "**CAM-CAN & Associates – Your time is my business**". Cam Can & Associates has been uniquely designed around Cameron's skills and interests. It will provide him with a real job which focuses on an identified niche market for busy people.

While Cameron works, he will be providing a service to his customers and also contributing to his local community in a meaningful way. He will have responsibilities and also numerous opportunities to develop friendships and build relationships. Just like everyone else, he will also be earning an income.

So, if you are looking for someone to wait for installations, home deliveries or trades people and you can't take time off work – *Call: CAM-CAN!*

Or, if you are unable to leave your home to attend to small errands such as collecting dry-cleaning, validating your lotto ticket or purchasing the odd grocery items – *Call: CAM-CAN!*

We are actively looking for people to support Cameron and his business so if you know anyone who might be interested in lending a hand please contact Anthea on 9310 1554 or Pete on 0411745324.

Other achievements of Cameron's Microboard

The Microboard has succeeded in achieving other meaningful outcomes for Cameron. When Cameron's Plan was mapped out in a person centered planning exercise, a number of dreams and goals that were real and meaningful for him were identified, only one of which was to have a job when he left school. Some of these other aspirations included:

- Going to “Leavers” in his final year of school
- Going on a holiday
- Spending time regularly on the family farm
- Being an active member in his local community
- Having a home of his own

In just two years since developing Cameron’s Plan, it is already possible to look back and see the progress that has been made.

- Cameron has attended “Leavers” and has been on a holiday
- Cameron now spends three days in every month helping out on his cousins farm
- Through numerous discussions, progress is being made towards designing plans for Cameron’s living arrangements when he leaves home, at a typical age. This is the next major item on the Microboard’s agenda.

It needs to be acknowledged that these things have been achieved due to Cameron’s Microboard creating a response for Cameron when all other formal support providers said that it could not be done. Our advice from others was that Cameron would never have meaningful employment and would never be able to make a contribution to his community. Cameron will leave school at the end of this year and will start work as a director of his own micro-business. It also needs to be acknowledged that all of the achievements of Cameron’s Microboard to date have come at no financial cost to government.

The continued commitment of Cameron’s Microboard members ensures he is included in and contributes to his community in a meaningful way. It will not only ensure the security of plans put in place but will also address any issues that arise during his lifetime. We can not thank Cameron’s Microboard members enough.