

Expect the Impossible

Marlena Katene is a young woman who lives at the Gold Coast. While her physical disability is a part of who she is, she has dreams, goals and ambitions which have led to her becoming a business owner and budding journalist. She is nearing the end of her journalism degree and when not studying she enjoys travel, business development conferences and generally just hanging out with friends. In this article she explores the importance of expectations, their importance to her and how they continue to motivate her as she looks to the future.

What is it you see when you look at me?

What immediately pops in to your mind in the first ten seconds of our first encounter?

It would be naïve to think that you do not notice my wheelchair or the fact I don't speak. These are the physical attributes of my disability that cannot be disguised, not that I would want to. I wonder how far these physical attributes contribute to the perceptions that are placed on me. We do not get a second chance to make a first impression and unfortunately for some first impressions stick.

It is human nature to judge and these judgments can affect people's expectations for someone with a disability. With limited expectations what kind of life will occur? For someone with a disability expectations determine the *quality of life* that the person lives. That's a term that many disability services have used or still regularly use but many still are falling behind in expectations of their consumers. When I get new supports in my life I reserve my own right to judge (this is my life after all) and think to myself.

Do you expect me to contribute to the world as an equal?

Do you expect me to be a taxpayer and enter into the workforce?

Do you just see me as having physical needs which is why I require you in my life?

This is how I assess whether these people enter my life or not. If they can embrace my dreams, visions and goals then they are welcomed on board to be part of the team. This team is going to support me moving in the way I want to head. As my life is constantly moving and changing directions it is vital I don't waste time with people who may place their limiting expectations upon me.

I am so fortunate my mother and many others have set high expectations for me my whole life. Sometimes these expectations were perceived as insanity by teachers (or others around them) who obviously could not see the bigger picture, dreams and vision held by my mother. They could not understand why my mother would insist I buy a recorder in Grade Three music class, and blow (some may say dribble) in it and make awesome music with my peers in a regular music class. Despite not sounding that great it could be argued the lack of noise **automatically** made me one of the top five performers.

Another example is that my mother expected me to read and get books from the library from a young age. Many torn pages, stuck together ever so discreetly with sticky tape, were returned to the library. Those high expectations continue to be important now - if it wasn't for her expectations then I wouldn't be writing this article now, or running my own business, or blogging, or studying at university! High expectations have been part of my life from a young age and remain so to this very day.

Limited expectations go part and parcel for many with a disability and too often I have heard the phrase “As long as they are happy”. My life is “happy” now because of the expectations placed upon me.

There were times in my life, especially in high school, where it would have been easier to lower my expectations. Not having to complete similar tasks to that of my peers would definitely have been less stressful. While at times I would have loved to avoid the many tears I do know these are part of life.

Without discounting the need for happiness, as I believe it is everyone’s ultimate goal, I ask how can we truly be happy when people lower their expectations of us? With lowered expectations our life experiences are very limited and our reliance on others increases. My happiness comes from the many roles I have as well as my natural supports. They have taken my life to a whole new level. Having their expectations in my life have made me the individual I am. I am in the driver’s seat of where my life is heading whilst being supported by a number of like-minded visionaries who offer the support I need.

When I look at why my life is going okay I look to those that have had a vision for my life from a young age. I look to those who expected me to maintain milestones and experiences despite not being able to speak and using a wheelchair.

It hasn't been an easy road and like everyone I have had my share of dramas to get where I am today. I too have had the opportunity to fail and experience negatives in life. It hasn't all been roses.

I thank God for the stability of many people, both family and friends, that has ensured support has been in place around the major areas of my journey into adulthood. Education, social and more recently career development are the big ones in my life. Many people I know with a disability would not like to be defined or known just by their disabilities and I am no different. However, as I have many other adventures and developments going on in my life, I can honestly say that my disability is truly only one part of who I am.

“Expect a person with a disability to achieve the impossible.

Life needs vision, not just to be managed.

Start to dream and set goals.

Break down the dreams into bite size realities and watch lives change”