

Autonomy, Employment and the Transition to Independence

Selina Maffey lives in far north Queensland and is the mother of Angelica who is 26 years old. Angelica grew up in a rural community, went to the local school and then the high school in the nearest town twenty seven kilometres away. Since finishing school eight years ago Angelica has been working at a local resort in Port Douglas. In this article Selina reflects on the important role employment has played in her daughter's life and how it has led to a full life of independence and opportunity beyond everyone's expectations.

I wanted Angelica to get a job. I was not entirely convinced it would happen.

A lot of work went into seeking work experience while Angelica was at school and by the time she left school she had an extensive resume.

Prior to seriously looking for work Angelica had a gap year. During this time she travelled overseas, volunteered and travelled with us to Sydney – each experience offered Angelica learning opportunities and with these she gained confidence.

I was advised by a friend to look for a big employer because smaller businesses require their employees to do many jobs, some of which may be too challenging for my daughter. Angelica was linked with an employment agency that did preliminary work to get Angelica ready for work. At the end of the gap year I was on the lookout.

Whilst at the markets one weekend I ran into a business manager of a Five Star resort which happened to be the biggest employer in town and after a discussion she encouraged me to arrange a meeting. As requested Angelica took her resume and to our surprise we were met with a very positive remark; "Well you look like you have done work experience everywhere else, I think it's time for us to see how we can help you". Angelica was about to turn twenty years old and was keen to work.

The disability employment agency took over and from that time as a parent I was left out of negotiations with the employer. If I had any issues I discussed them with the agency.

The employment agency and the resort did research and created a position for Angelica. Soon after she started she was offered a trial in "The Hub" between the kitchen and the restaurant where the glasses, cutlery and dishes were managed. A few modifications took place to make the job more suitable for Angelica and she took to the position remarkably well. Of course there were difficulties – like lots of tempting food in the staff canteen but over time any concerns were dealt with and resolved.

When there were 600 or more people for breakfast in peak season some of the High School students or back packers joined her in The Hub. I was told Angelica took charge and helped her transient team manage The Hub efficiently.

We lived 1300ft up in the mountains and Angelica worked down on the coast. The forty kilometres travel to and from work each way was a challenge. I had asked around and had been directed to a wonderful lady who started work at a similar time to Angelica. She arranged to pick Angelica up at 7.00am three mornings a week and later helped us link with others who worked similar shifts when her shifts changed. After a while Angelica had five individuals to call on for a lift.

As I was working, Angelica soon took charge and rang to confirm who was picking her up. She would inform me of the plan as we rushed out the door to drive four kilometres to the end of our road to drop her off for the thirty five minute ride. With one driver who loved music, they sang together all the way down the hill

usually wearing sun glasses bought by one of the drivers who noticed Angelica did not like the morning glare. I can't speak highly enough about the kindness and generosity of these great people over a period of four years – there was never a falter and Angelica made work on time each day.

For the return home, Angelica had to catch two buses. She would ring the bus company on the way down the range in the morning and book the afternoon bus to the closest town. On the bus, Angelica often took care of the young Primary School students who were on their way home from school and this led to friendships. Angelica had an hour to wait to catch the High School bus up the range in the afternoon. It wasn't perfect but Angelica managed with only a few incidents.

One incident was when she decided to cross the busy road to purchase a red slushy (drink) to take on the bus. Determined not to miss the bus she ran over the road without her normal caution and got knocked down by a truck. Luckily it was only enough to frighten her and twist her knee and of greater importance to her, she saved the red slushy drink. So many people came to her aid; people who were in cars, people walking down the street, High School students who knew Angelica – one benefit of an inclusive education throughout Kindergarten, Primary and High school. With all of this natural support available to her I was one of the last to hear about it, despite the fact I was working over the road. It is moments like this that remind me how important it is that so many people know Angelica and take such an interest in her welfare.

Work helped Angelica to put some structure into her week. She was very proud of her work and loved meeting new friends and going to work parties. After Angelica had been working for four years she no longer wanted to spend so much time travelling every day.

Despite never wanting Angelica to move out, when she was offered a unit that was affordable and in the right location I took her to have a look. Angelica walked through the unit and didn't say anything. I thought that meant she was not interested. A short time after arriving home, I heard her dragging the suitcase down the stairs – "Let's go" she said. And that was it; we were onto the next stage of the journey.

Angelica has been living independently, coming home at the weekends for the last two years. She now walks to work. She loves managing her life and has learnt a lot more skills. She is never late for work and is the most dependable reliable worker.

The disability employment agency mysteriously signed Angelica off and she was advised that she was no longer registered with their service. I rang after trying to understand what had happened, and I was informed they were not providing support to Angelica because she was well supported in her work place and had been stable in the job for a significant period.

For the first time, after six years of employment I was able to see Angelica working, as the Assessor for the Supported Wage needed a witness. I met Angelica's work friends and witnessed the complexities of the job. Needless to say I was very proud as she took charge of the tasks; working in a team who obviously love her, value her and depend on her. Despite staff and management changes at work I am confident that there are enough people who know how to support Angelica. She is just one of the team, permanently employed.

In Angelica's early life I worked hard to find the latest research to support Angelica to communicate and learn. I believed that everyday life in the local schools and community with her peers would be the only place Angelica would learn what is expected socially and to live as a member of our society.

As much as I may have dreamed, I never expected Angelica to manage her life so efficiently. She is forever reminding me of her appointments with property agents, medical appointments, dates and times of travel to Brisbane. I have become so blasé I recently forgot to check if she knew the correct time to get a taxi to the airport in Brisbane to catch a plane to Cairns. She managed regardless. This is remarkable for a young lady who could not add one and one reliably when she left school, could not write even a short sentence and had difficulty working out past and present when telling stories - and she was never able to keep her room tidy!

With money, Angelica now asks for the correct amount and then shops - coming in on budget without support. She keeps her unit clean and tidy. She writes using a program on her computer. Slowly her written sentences are increasing.

Angelica is engaged and is planning to get married to her long term partner in 2015. She has lots of fun visiting him and planning for David's visits. He works, so is aware that Angelica needs to maintain her work routine during his visits - as Angelica supports David's work when she visits him in Brisbane. I have no idea what the future holds, however I do anticipate that Angelica will treasure her life – a life determined by her and not limited by having a disability – in her case Down syndrome.

It is important to say that Angelica's job was the first important routine after school that demanded a high standard and a commitment. She has sustained varied relationships at work and in the community. The skills Angelica has learnt from work have flowed onto the rest of her life. Real life has been Angelica's best teacher, while the community has supported Angelica to enable this to happen.

Challenges will always be a part of Angelica's life but together we can work through these.