

There comes a time in every young man's life

The Termont-Schenk family live in a small coastal community north of Brisbane. They have been involved in the disability world for 33 years and have always been strong advocates for all people being immersed in their local and world communities. They were instrumental in starting a cooperative in their local region; are active members of the Queensland Folk Federation; Woodford Folk Festival and Woodfordia Treehuggers as well as Zonta and Brotherhood of the Wordless.

In this article Pam shares her experience of what they have learnt over the past 8 years since Jamon moved into his own home. Jamon, a keen artist and weatherman, is supported by his family, flatmate, friends and support workers. Jamon believes that it is important to give back and loves his life. His thoughts on this are reflected in the quotes accompanying Pam's article.

There comes a time in every young man's life when he's gotta leave home whether it's by his own motivation or not. For some young men that decision is easier and for others a lot harder. Our son Jamon made it quite clear (mostly through his behaviour) a couple of years after finishing high school that, like his older sister and good friends, he would like to move out of home and make the transition to adulthood.

The leaving home process varies from person to person. For Jamon the planning was purposeful, intentional, not done alone, and was a process that lasted about three years. Planning didn't come without apprehension, fears, tears and a clear vision for Jamon to be an integral part of our family, his neighbourhood and his community. To live his life of choice we always knew that Jamon would need paid support to supplement the natural support of his family, friends and wider community. In our hearts we also knew that he liked people and would want to share his flat and that he really needed the safeguard of another person living with him.

Steve and I got to a stage where we realised that we didn't have all the questions, much less the answers, to help Jamon to achieve his goal. When it came to Jamon moving into a home of his own we felt we needed a more formal structure around him. We also needed that same structure to support us to help Jamon come up with the direction and guidance he needed in his life. So we formed Jamon's Support Network.

Jamon has been in his own home for eight years now. These years have given us the time to identify some beacons that help guide and illuminate important philosophies we hold around Jamon's life. Jamon has authority of his own life and we are here to assist him to develop, nurture and live the life he chooses. Jamon needs assistance from his family, friends and paid support worker to help maintain and develop relationships. It is important to maintain a natural blend of the people in Jamon's life and that everyone works together in a respectful and supportive relationship.

Life sharing is what we all do when we marry, move in with our partners and move out of the family home, so why would it be different for Jay? He longs for real connection with people. He often talks about his friends, past support workers and family. Jamon's flyers and adverts when searching for a new flatmate say things like "are you looking for something in your life beyond a share house? To

truly connect and share life with those you live with?" This lets potential flatmates know from the start that this isn't the ordinary flatmate situation.

We find it is a balancing act on how to make the process of finding a new flatmate a natural thing when prospective people are being screened by the person's parents first. Yet the reality is that this natural family support is a required constant in Jamon's life. We also inform them that he has paid support workers in his life daily which means that those people come and go in the house under his and our direction to assist him to live his life.

When Jamon was living in a bungalow at our house and his support workers were coming into our home environment we experienced firsthand what it is like when someone comes into your personal living space. This helped us to communicate how to manoeuvre the awkwardness, interruption, pleasant exchanges, and unexpectedness that occurs for Jamon as well as for the informal and formal supports in his life when they connect.

Jamon also has a list of questions he asks in a second interview. He is very up front that if the person doesn't like open windows or getting up early in the morning it might not work out! He also acknowledges that their needs are important and it needs to be a respectful, two-sided relationship in the house when it comes to windows being open or closed, TV or music volume or what is being watched on TV or DVDs. Ultimately the decision of which flatmate to choose is up to Jamon; he has the last say.

Jamon's flatmate has an ordinary relationship with Jamon with some additional responsibilities. Flatmates know what Jamon expects of them; things like trust (which he explains and goes into detail about what that looks like for him); to live here freely as a companion and friend and not be in a more formal paid or volunteer role; and to have a genuine desire to live with him and assist him to share life with family and friends. In exchange for basically living rent free but sharing all the normal expenses of day to day living, Jamon's flatmate is expected to be sleeping at the flat overnight Sunday through Thursday nights unless we are notified so we can make other arrangements. We understand they have their own lives and we are willing to make adjustments in our life to accommodate that.

Jamon wants his flatmate to make his home their home as well. They have done this by bringing along their own families, friends, animals, plants, and household items. The development of life sharing is slow and Jamon allows new flatmates to arrive at that place in their own time and comfort. Each flatmate has established their own individual relationship with Jamon, his family and friends and his paid support workers. Jamon's present flatmate is taking on the life sharing qualities naturally. The guys go off nearly every morning for a walk and to do a circuit training session at a nearby park and then enjoy breakfast together. Occasionally on a Sunday afternoon our family will cook dinner together at Jamon's flat and his flatmate will join us if he is home. We have gone on hikes together, to theatre nights or musicals and for walks on the beach.

Somewhere along the way we realised that the concept of life sharing also includes the people that are in the paid, formal roles in Jamon's life. Life is really an interdependence of all our lives as we mix and mingle in whatever role we might have at the moment and with whomever we are with. For example, we have encouraged support workers over the years to bring their children (babies, toddlers, young kids) to work on occasion if needed so Jamon gets experience with young children.

This has been wonderful as it now translates for him into our own family. One of Jamon's support workers and his flatmate share a keen interest in fish. So Jamon's house went from having his one small tank he's kept for years to several more plus one huge tank.

Jamon's formal supports are in the role of paid support workers and there are some priorities that they are paid to keep upmost in their work. The relationship with Jamon's flat mate has a priority. They are there to support Jamon's connections and involvements in natural networks in his life. This includes how they interact when spontaneous events happen in Jamon's life such as when a friend passes by for a visit and they are there working, or family wants to go to dinner with Jamon that night when they are 'rostered', or someone invites him out for the night. Workers know their place which does not mean taking on a subservient role. On the contrary they will be asked their opinions and/or advice – in this context the relationship is a 'partnership.' In other situations like when friends come for dinner, paid staff will need to assume a less prominent role by paying attention to things like not getting too involved in conversation. We emphasise to Jay's workers that the flatmate is not in a paid role or volunteer role. The level and manner that the flatmate chooses to be involved in Jamon's life is up to them and they are not to be relied upon for information or treated as a worker. All workers are to be working in a relationship with Jamon's family and friends that involves mutual respect, humanness, individuality, honesty, openness, trust, and modesty.

Jamon says he is keen for all people involved in his life to contribute to thinking about aspects that will enrich his life but, as he puts it, he has 'two different worlds.' He sees both these worlds as important to living his life and that they need to connect.

As parents, our challenge to help Jamon to maintain and develop relationships remains at the top of our priority list. We reinforce to all people involved in Jamon's life that he is the one who has difficulty developing and maintaining relationships. He is the common link that brought them together and he would like to maintain that connection. When it comes to the involvement of people in Jamon's life we'd prefer that they do what comes naturally for them. However, we have learned that some people want or need more purposeful or formal invitations in place to maintain their involvement.

A common comment from both flatmates and support workers as they leave their roles is that they have felt fortunate to have been brought together with Jamon, his family, his friends and others. They say they have learned so much about themselves along the way. In being with Jamon they have been taught about their own humanity and humility, their own personal failings and inhibitions, their capacities and weaknesses. The depth of the experience can be life changing for Jamon and his flatmate, workers and their children. We are pleased that Jamon is doing his bit to raise the next generation with compassion, understanding, knowledge and experience.