



Daring to have high workplace expectations

A presentation by Jo Basha

The first thing I think you need to know about us is that we are a regular family just doing regular things.

Every day starts pretty much the same as Nathan prepares to leave the house. He gets a kiss on the forehead and what I like to believe are a few words of wisdom... "Be the best that you can be." Then I give him an affectionate pat on the back and I say, "Go get 'em tiger".

The affectionate pat on the back is a gentle reminder that it's all up to you. Then he's off to journey through his day. And what a journey it has been as Nathan has navigated his way through school and work experience to paid employment.

To have a son who can say, "I am living the dream," certainly keeps a smile on my face. When I reflect on how that has come to pass, I have to be honest and say that it wasn't due to any structured or formalised approach. We just simply believed that Nathan could live a life full of possibility just like his two brothers. The expectations around Nathan are the same as they are for his brothers. Like his brothers, we hope that all three of our children will reach their potential...whatever that will be. It is only through experiencing life and taking risks that we come to know anyone's potential.

We have always supported boys to try things out, to express their likes and dislikes and to know that what they say will be listened to. I suppose that another way of putting it is that we have always done our best to create a space for them to experience the highs and lows of life so that they can learn and grow from their experiences.

Also, like his brothers, we have tried to provide Nathan with guidance and support to the extent that this will facilitate him achieving his dreams.

Nathan commenced work experience at the start of Year 11 for one day a week. It was organised by the school. His first placement was at Target. Nathan would tell you he enjoyed working in the ladies underwear section hanging the g-strings...I think it's fair to say most teenage boys would...but he didn't like working in the docks where it was dirty, cold and isolated. He knew that this was not the type of work that was best suited to him and, as parents, we wanted something more suitable for Nathan and decided to be more proactive in the future.

At the time, Marcel (my husband) and I asked ourselves, what does Nathan enjoy the most? What is he passionate about? What would be a good fit at the age of 17? He's really passionate about film. So, I made my first phone call to our local Video Ezy store. I told him about Nathan's love of film and simply asked the owner if Nathan could do some work experience. Nathan commenced work experience Thursday afternoons after school. I also spent Thursday afternoons in the video store to support him. He enjoyed this time and he learnt many skills - like sorting and filing DVDs alphabetically in their specific genres. He also learnt to keep the shelves in order and dust free. He was good at this job, however, it was highly likely that there would be no long term future in this type of role. So, Marcel and I discussed where we would like to see Nathan long-term.

I thought corporate. Suit, city, big end of town – a wonderful dream...or so I thought.

I had remembered a conversation I had had with a friend's husband. He had worked previously with a person with disability and he spoke very favourably about that experience. He spoke about how much the employee was respected and valued in the work place. That's what we wanted for Nathan - employment where he would be a respected and contributing, valued employee.

So, I made a second phone call and spoke to my friend to see if Nathan could do some work experience at her husband's work. Although he had just changed his employment and was in a new job, he sent an email to his Human Resources Department making a request on Nathan's behalf. It was approved by the CEO and supported by Nathan's school. A structured plan was put in place for Nathan to commence work experience. He was provided with guidance and learned how to catch the ferry to Circular Quay and walk the distance to the offices at Chifley Towers.

So, over an 18 month period, every Friday during school term, Nathan would work at a major Global financial services and wealth management firm. He was an office assistant and did tasks such as sorting the mail, the mail run, re-filling of photo copiers, checking security bins and odd deliveries over the four floors. Some of Nathan's strengths include that he is generous and open and has a quick wit. By being so, he gives others the opportunity to be the same and so he enjoyed a very social experience with his co-workers.

This was the big end of town and the feedback we received was that they loved having Nathan around and I loved him being there. As you can imagine – we were feeling quite self satisfied. When it came toward the end of Nathan's year 12 schooling, Nathan's mentor and supervisor at work called him in for his weekly update meeting and said, "Well Nathan, you're nearing the end of your schooling what do you see yourself doing? Do you see yourself working here?" "Oh no," said Nathan "This is just work experience, I want to work with celebrities."

When his supervisor came out of the meeting and told me, “Well Jo, he doesn’t want to work here, he wants to work with celebrities,” let me tell you, there was a small part of me that wanted to grab Nathan by the throat. However, I took a deep breath and as we left the building that day I asked Nathan, “So, you want to work with celebrities, well how can we make that happen?” He promptly and very casually replied, “I could work at Nova Radio Station with Merrick and Rosso and Kate Richie.” These were the guys on radio that we listened to every morning as I drove my three boys to school. Again, a small part of me thought, “Yeah, right” and then the larger part of me thought, “Why can’t he live his dream, why can’t we at least try.”

I thought to myself, what’s the worst thing that can happen - they’ll say “No.” It’s definitely worth the risk.

So, I made my 3rd phone call. I called Nova Radio Station and their Human resources manager worked out of Adelaide. I started the conversation by saying, “Hello, my name is Joanne Basha, do you have just a few minutes as I’d like to tell you a story.” The response was, “Sure.” I simply told the truth. I have a son who has been doing work experience for 18 months every Friday during school term as an office assistant in a terrific company where they all love him. He’s nearing the end of his Year 12 and although he was offered work at this fabulous top shelf company, he wants to work at Nova Radio station.

I then said, “Now, you may be wondering, why is the mother of a 17 year old boy ringing me? Well, Nathan happens to have Down syndrome.” On the other end of the phone I was hearing, “We should do this, we could do this, this would be a good thing to do”. The company, at that time, did not have anyone with disability employed. And while I was talking work experience, HR was already thinking employment.

A meeting was arranged for the following week and I, along with a representative from the agency that was to provide Nathan with work place training and support, attended. I was armed with a photo of Nathan and hope. As I shook hands with the HR manager and introduced myself I handed him the photo of Nathan. I said, “This is Nathan and you could really make a difference to his life.”

And the rest is history. Nathan started work experience in Term four 2009 as his Year 12 cohort were sitting their HSC. He was employed by Nova in early 2010. And yes, Nathan is working with celebrities – and as he likes to tell everybody, he is ‘living the dream’.

Well, what did it take? Nathan was initially supported with post school funding designed to help him gain the skills and confidence he needed to secure employment. That service provider still supports him in the work place.

He used his strengths by being open and generous with people in the workplace. His supervisor at work, who is the Executive Assistant to the General Manager, has

become part of Nathan's network. His back up supervisor, although currently on maternity leave, is still in weekly contact with him. So, you can see that meaningful relationships have been forged. Nathan has even been given a spotters fee for recommending one of his childhood friends from his mainstream primary school for the receptionists role.

It's interesting to note, that she too says she is now living the dream.

Nathan's experience at Nova is so positive because it is such a terrific fit for him. Nathan's many interests and strengths reflect those of his co-workers. He loves music, film and comedy and so does everyone else. Nova is a very interactive workplace and Nathan's social interests really mean he is on the same wave length with others and that he has things to contribute. It is a context where he can shine.

This contrasts with Nathan's experience at the financial organisation. It was a great place with great people but it was not a great fit for Nathan.

So, how does one make a starting point to help another "live the dream"? In our case it took our attitude about what could be possible for Nathan in all facets of his life plus – at the most basic level - three phone calls.

1st the call to Video Ezy.

2nd the call to the big end of town, Morgan Stanley.

3rd the call to Nova Radio Station.

Three phone calls were the start. The start of a dream that put Nathan and his desires first. We dared to listen to his dream. He taught us to dream bigger. Ultimately, Nathan had the vision and my job was to listen and really hear his dream. He had an expanded sense of who he was. I was able to help make it a reality by following his lead and journey with him.

How did we do this? We did this by making use of connections and not settling for a work placement that didn't fit with who Nathan is. We did it by taking chances and facing the possibility of rejection. We did it by expecting that Nathan would have the same opportunities to discover who he is and forge his place in the world in all facets of life – including work.

Of course, the dreams you have for your sons and daughters or the people you support are going to be unique to them. What they need to make them happen will also be unique. I would say that even if dreams sound fanciful, there is always an achievable first step.

I encourage you to look for possibilities to dare to dream big. As we all know, we don't know anyone's potential if we don't explore opportunities and push the boundaries. I invite you to have the courage to try new things and take that first step, knowing that it may result in failure.

Please don't accept things you wouldn't accept for your other children or yourself.
Take risks and put aside your own fear of rejection.

What spurred me was that my hope for Nathan to live his dream was far greater than
my fear of rejection.

family

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