

## Reflections on my role as a circle member

*Nadia Samperi*

I'd been working with Jake as a support worker and tutor for about one year when his mum first asked if I wanted to join his 'Circle of Support'. Over that year, I felt I'd formed a pretty close relationship with Jake and his family. I'd shared some great times with Jake, highlights including seeing Newton Faulkner play live at the local University and many opportunities to share our mutual love of public transport. We also had our fair share of challenging times, mostly consisting of dramatic show-downs between us featuring me energetically goading him to complete his homework and him stubbornly insisting upon watching Harry Potter.

During our time together I'd also developed a strong connection with a number of his family members and friends. Of these, I was closest to his mum, Linda, who first introduced me to some of the more 'progressive' thinking around disability, including but not limited to the concept of Circles of support and inclusive education for which I am ever grateful.

It was after a day working with Jake that Linda first told me that she was organising a Circle of Support. She explained to me briefly that it would involve those closest to Jake meeting every so often to talk about supporting him to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life. She finished this off by saying that they would love it if I could be involved but of course there was no pressure if I had other commitments. As I was being asked as an individual who cared about Jake, Linda also told me that being a member of the Circle was voluntary so I wouldn't be attending meetings in my 'worker' role, or being paid to be involved.

If I had to sum up my reaction to this invitation in one word it would be: excitement! The second word would be: flattered. I was so excited and flattered to be invited to share in what seemed to me to be such a positive and inspiring venture. Not surprisingly, I said "yes!" right away.

Not long after, Linda's good friend, who had agreed to be the facilitator of our Circle, began sending out emails to book a date for our first meeting.

At first I wasn't sure what I could bring to the group. Out of everyone there I had known Jake for the least amount of time and (in my mind) had played the least significant role in his life. But during the course of our first meeting I realised we all had something unique and special to offer, each of us having a unique relationship with Jake and a unique perspective on life, having come from different backgrounds.

That first meeting was over a year ago now so my memories are a little hazy.

I remember a very warm atmosphere... Lots of laughing, sharing, reflecting, discussing and eating. I'll never forget the radiant smile Jake had plastered on his face as he sat amongst a whole group of people who were there purely because they love and care about him.

I remember that I really enjoyed a visioning exercise we did where we were asked to reflect on our own lives; what elements we treasured and couldn't do without, how we imagined our lives in 5 years and then ten years. Upon sharing our personal reflections it was clear that there were common threads for what made a 'good' and 'happy' life for every one of us: good health, family and friends, travel, financial security, ability to explore and pursue our interests and passions, having education and employment opportunities...This was a good starting point to begin visioning for Jake's life.

We talked about up and coming events for Jake such as his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party, completing high school, the subsequent trip to Queensland for 'schoolies' and how we could support him in these endeavours. During these discussions I realised how valuable it was to have such a diversity of people at the table who knew Jake in different ways and contexts. Being of Jake's generation and the youngest in the group, I was able to contribute from a unique perspective which was helpful when discussing topics like schoolies.

I also really enjoyed getting to know other people who were important to Jake when the formal meeting had finished. We sat around eating gourmet pizza and drinking wine (and/or soft-drink) and just generally having a good time! I think these less formal moments are just as important as the planning and discussing that takes place in meetings.

I haven't been actively involved in Jake's Circle for quite a while now. I went travelling overseas for eight months not long after our first few meetings and now I've returned, I'm living in a different city. Never-the-less, it's been lovely to receive updates about Jake and the Circle from time to time and I've kept up with him via email. It's great to know that now I'm settled back in Australia I can attend Jake's next Circle meeting via phone link-up if not in person. Either way, I certainly intend to stay involved.

I think this adaptability is definitely one of the strengths of Circles of Support. For me, not having any pressure to be a 'life member', with a set of steady responsibilities to adhere to, made me feel more relaxed and comfortable about being involved initially.

I may not have maintained my role in Jake's life if the Circle hadn't provided a structure for my involvement. I also may not have shared my ideas and thoughts about Jake's future had I not been given the space and prompting that is offered by the Circle.



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