

JACKmail: more than just a mail service

My son, Jackson West, is the man at the centre of JACKmail, a family owned, sole-trader courier business which operates in Canberra, Australia.

People establish small businesses all the time but Jackson is a young man who would never normally be able to find a job. Jackson has a profound intellectual disability and autism due to a unique chromosome abnormality; he has an extra terminal band on the long arm of the 22nd chromosome. What this means is that he has very high support needs; Jackson has no verbal communication, no concept of danger and needs others to attend to his every need.

Jackson is a person who is easily overlooked, and often totally ignored, by others. He is in danger of living permanently on the fringes of society, marginalised in the parallel disabled universe instead of fully participating in life with its rich experiences and relationships.

Some years before Jackson finished school, I started to put several things in place that might assist him to have a life of his own; a life in many aspects not dissimilar to the lives his three brothers enjoy. The elements of this long-term plan included forming a family governance group with two other families, creating a website, forming a circle of support, establishing some partnerships and finding him a job.

As stated above, it was highly unlikely that anyone would give Jackson a job, but that didn't mean that he couldn't work. I firmly believed that he had the capacity to work. It just had to be the right kind of work with enough of the right kind of support. The right kind of work for Jackson was going to have to be built around him, his abilities and the things he enjoys doing. The right kind of support meant one-on-one support by a particular kind of person – a person who would put Jackson first, promote him as a person, foster relationships, develop his skills and enjoy being with him.

In the early hours of one morning as I was lying sleepless in bed, I mentally catalogued Jackson's abilities and loves, and the solution came to me in one of those rare moments of clarity and certainty – he just had to be a courier.

But not just any courier. The work had to be regular and predictable with Jackson delivering to the same businesses either every day or, at least, every week. One of the most important aspects of the business was that Jackson would get to know people and that people would get to know him.

So, JACKmail was created to employ Jackson part-time. JACKmail primarily collects mail from post office boxes and delivers it to businesses. But occasionally the business delivers tender documents and couriers small items between businesses.

JACKmail has been operating since February 2007 and was officially launched by Ms Katy Gallagher, the ACT Minister for Disability, on the 2nd March. Every week-day morning Jackson makes his deliveries with his driver, Jamie Richardson. Jackson has gradually been learning new skills associated with his job.

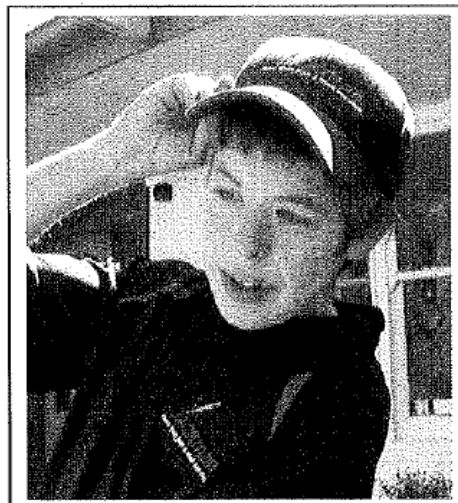
So far JACKmail has achieved the following:

- 19 businesses use JACKmail either regularly or occasionally
- Jackson has a legitimate and valued presence in the Canberra business community
- Over 25 people in offices greet Jackson every morning
- Jackson is doing regular, predictable and appreciated work
- Jackson is missed - people want to know where he is if he is sick (the mail still gets delivered but without him)
- Jackson is known - people in the street say "Hi", stop for a chat, wave, smile
- Jackson has learnt and is learning some work and social skills
- Jackson is earning money
- Jackson has a purpose and is busy five mornings a week
- His employment subsidises the cost of his care
- JACKmail has established some working partnerships with organisations and businesses
- JACKmail has been nominated for the ACT Chief Minister's Inclusion Award in Small Business.

The business has been a great success if you disregard the financial side of it which, in the grand scheme of things, is not really that important compared to getting Jackson a life.

I continue to promote the business through speaking at workshops, training days, conferences, the ACT Women's Chamber of Business and Rotary Clubs. JACKmail was featured in The Australian Week-end Colour Magazine in July and has been filmed by 60 Minutes for broadcasting sometime this year.

If you would like Sally to speak about the business, phone 02 62810974 (office) or email sally@jacksonwest.org



To find out more about Jackson visit www.jacksonwest.org

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