

You too can climb high: A message to young people just like me!



*The following was written by **Gareth Ward** and published in The Sydney Morning Herald, April 3rd 2019. Thank you to Gareth for permission to publish here!*

Gareth is the member for Kiama and was sworn in as the new Minister for Disability Services and Minister for Family and Community Services, April 3rd 2019. He was born with albinism and is legally blind.

When I was born, my parents were told by doctors in the early 1980s, "You'll need to keep him in the dark and behind closed doors". Some teachers told my parents, "He won't amount to much, but do your very best."

Yesterday, I was the first person in NSW with a disability to become Minister for Disability Services. At 37, I've been elected to my local council twice and State Parliament three times. I hold degrees in arts, commerce and law, I'm an admitted legal practitioner and hold qualifications in music, having completed studies at the Wollongong Conservatorium.

To a young person living with a disability today I would say this: be bold - be brave. Your road in life has its challenges, but it will only make you more determined.

You may not like to ask for help. I was a kid that often didn't like to ask for help and hated the thought of being a burden. But know you are not a burden so long as you always do your very best. The fact that you have a disability makes the adventures of life more challenging but it makes the successes and victories ever sweeter.

You may be left out. I know what it's like to be left out. I was always the last kid to be picked for every sport, particularly those that involve teams. But I found what I was good at and what I enjoyed. For me it was swimming. I wasn't the best but I had a go and, by year 10, I was our high school sports house captain.

You may be bullied. There were times when I was bullied because of my sight and how I looked. In my younger years, it was somewhat of a sport to steal my hat and throw it around among my peers.

There are few things more debilitating than being segregated or singled out because of who you are and through no fault of your own; being looked upon in a way that makes you feel less valued, less able or less capable.

But rest assured, for every person that wants to hurt, there are hundreds that want to care and empower. For some, this comes naturally, but you too have an obligation to educate those around you not just for your own sake, but for those that may not know how or have the courage to speak up. (continued over)

Know you live in a time where technology has never made life more accessible with better prospects for the future. As a child, I never had the luxury of being able to read a book in bed or experience that moment of gaining a driver's licence. Today, the advent of tablet technology provides a host of opportunities for children with disabilities and not just those with low vision. And driverless cars are already on the road with trials happening in our state of driverless public transport.

You live in a time where disabilities are no longer about the politics but about warm and caring outcomes.

You live in a time where there is a great acceptance for difference and diversity; inclusion is actively pursued and not merely a promise.

If ever you feel "can't" before "could", if you doubt before doing, know that I felt exactly the same way you did. I've walked the darkest valleys but let me assure you, you can experience the dizzying highs.

Be bold. Be Brave!