

# An unexpected journey: Fostering a child with an intellectual disability

by Gloria Jelleff



Michael and Gloria

In October 1971, myself, my husband and our two daughters, Coral (8 years) and Alison (4 years) became Cottage parents for the Social Welfare Department of Victoria in a Family Group Home established in Templestowe.

Family Group Homes were set up in areas with access to schools and services and managed by the Social Welfare Department. The cottage parents were employed to provide care to up to four wards of State placed in the Family Group Homes. The purpose of the program was to keep siblings together

who came into care, instead of them becoming separated in segregated orphanages or reception centres. We provided a “normal” family environment for children that required long term foster care placements. The “state wards” called us Aunty and Uncle to differentiate our role as substitute carers until such time as they were able to return to the care of their birth parents. Birth parents were able to have phone and make contact visits to the Family Group home as well as take their children on outings and holidays. Social workers employed by the Social Welfare

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department assisted birth parents with reunification with their children.

In 1983, we had a vacancy for a single child. We were approached by a social welfare officer and asked if we would consider caring for a “mildly retarded” 10 year old boy. He had lived at Allambie Reception Centre for the past three years following the death of his mother. Although Michael had an older half sister, he was not able to live with her. The other alternative would have been for Michael to be placed in institutionalised care.

Michael attended a special school in the inner Melbourne suburb of Balwyn. I met with Michael’s teachers, Beth and Audrey, so I could understand Michael’s needs prior to him living with us. Beth and Audrey were very positive about Michael’s progress and felt that Michael would benefit from living in a family environment. Thus Michael came to live with us.

Due to my lack of experience in working with children with disabilities, Michael was never treated any differently to other children that I cared for. My expectations of him were the same as the rest of our extended family.

Michael comprehended what we said to him and responded by nodding his head or touching my hands to “Yes” or “No” signs. His speech was described as “echolalic”. During his time at Allambie, Michael had learnt a lot of swear words that caused embarrassing moments in a community of very critical neighbours. By setting a good example and many admonishments, Michael ceased this behaviour.

Michael enjoyed sport especially cricket, football and riding bikes with the other children. Sometimes he amused himself in the sandpit or stroking our black cat Cindy.

After several months of witnessing his “odd” behaviour, Michael was diagnosed as autistic by a paediatrician at the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne. The paediatrician was very helpful in advising me on what to expect as Michael reached puberty.

Michael made good progress at Special School and was chosen to attend an integrated primary school

in Kew. At the age of fourteen, Michael transitioned to secondary school (Swinburne Junior Tech) in Camberwell. Michael represented his school in cross-country running and won medals.

During his school years, Michael developed an interest in computers. We attended seminars on computer programs to help Michael to communicate but there was no funding available to buy him a computer. A neighbour offered us a very early second hand computer for \$30.00. We purchased the computer for Michael. He loved plugging his computer into the television and learning how to print words on the screen. He was able to read his name, address and indicate the food he liked to eat. Michael was able to recognize simple words and logos from the Yellow Pages and bus timetables. From this he was able to learn how to travel by himself on public transport.

Michael attended D.E.A.L. (now the Annie MacDonald Centre) established by Rosemary Crossley. Michael was assessed by the speech pathologists and he was able to further develop his computer skills to enable him to communicate with others.

At 18 years of age, Michael started absconding regularly on public transport. A behavioural psychologist was able to identify what Michael was trying to tell me with his behaviour. He wanted to show me that he could take care of himself and was ready to leave the family “nest”.

In 1993, a vacancy was found for Michael in a shared supported accommodation house in Geelong. Michael continues to share this house with his co-tenants and they are great friends. Unfortunately, the broker of the Group Home was not able to provide for Michael’s communication needs via the computer. We tried using Compic cards with Michael but we had mixed success with this communication strategy.

Four years ago, the management of Michael’s group home was taken over by Encompass disability services. Michael now owns and uses an iPad tablet to communicate and access educational games. He is assisted by a speech pathologist at his day program. His keyworker, Tess, at his group home provides encouragement and support to Michael with the use of his iPad.

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Michael chooses not to verbally communicate unless he is on antibiotics or has had a beer. He prefers to use facial expression and gesture to indicate his preferences. Michael became a participant of NDIS during the trial site rollout in the Barwon region. Michael enjoys his regular outings to sporting activities with his matched support worker. It is hoped that these positive experiences enable Michael to have some control over his life choices.

Michael manages to live a full life enjoying many outings and holidays. He regularly visits his “Aunty Gloria” and his family in N.S.W. Michael is much loved and respected by all whose lives he touches.



**PLEASE NOTE Jo, Gloria and Michael will be presenting together at a seminar “listening to people rarely heard” in Melbourne on April 26th in 2018. Watch out for the event being advertised.**