



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
ADJOURNMENT
Disability Services
SPEECH

Monday, 19 September 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Monday, 19 September 2011
Page 5799
Questioner
Speaker Senator McKENZIE

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

() (NaN.NaN pm)

Senator McKENZIE (Victoria) (22:0 0): Before I became a senator, I spoke with a couple in their 70s from a dairy farm in regional Victoria. It was the first real conversation about disability support that I had ever had. I was about 32 years of age at the time. They had been caring for their son for about 40 years and were extremely anxious about what would happen to him when they could no longer provide the care that he needed over a 24-hour period. I now know that there are 161,000 people in Victoria with a disability. Given that 28 per cent of Victorians live outside of Melbourne, and if you presume that disability crosses all socioeconomic groups, there must be about 46,000 people living with a disability outside of Melbourne. Forty-six thousand is a lot of people.

The Productivity Commission's report into disability care and support confirmed what these people already know, what many of us know—that there is a significant disparity between city and regional support for those people with a disability right across Australia. The government knows it too. The Productivity Commission report states that rural and remote areas face poorer provisions of support than would be available in cities and metropolitan areas. The current system is fundamentally flawed. The availability of support has been limited by location, and many families in regional and rural Victoria have not been able to get access to funding or assistance. The report says that, as the system currently operates, everyone has to compete for a limited pool of resources, and for many families it is a situation of crisis.

There is no dignity in that. I do not believe it is how a civil society should treat its most vulnerable and the people who care for them. The people I have met, who confront my notions of hard work and sacrifice, are challenged so desperately, and I am appalled and furious at the state of affairs.

After the official opening of my office in Bendigo, one of my first jobs as senator was to join individuals, their carers and families at a DisabiliTea at the local town hall. The program brought together more than 200 groups in venues throughout Victoria, and they were able to sip tea and share stories. They were excited about the potential of a national disability insurance scheme, or NDIS. They saw it as a revolution in health

services that would allow them to choose the types of services they or their disabled family members needed.

It was with great humility at a later date that I spoke with over 20 carers at a BrainLink forum for those caring for people with an acquired brain injury. It was called Changed Lives and was held at Traralgon in the Latrobe Valley. All the people at the forum who I spoke to would do just about anything to have their lives changed. BrainLink is a community based care and education organisation that focuses on the effect of acquired brain injuries on the whole family, assisting those who have been injured to adjust and assisting families to come to terms with the changed reality they now find themselves in.

The number of people with an acquired brain injury in Victoria is approximately 73,000, of whom 31,000 need personal assistance or supervision. This usually falls to the parent or partner of the person. But the experience of those in regional areas like Traralgon and beyond—down into the depths of Gippsland—for those with a disability such an acquired brain injury is mixed, with services and support sporadic and spread over a large geographic area making access for many problematic.

The BrainLink forum I attended was one of five being rolled out by the organisation over the coming year right to address some of these concerns across regional Victoria. The people I met on the day were participating in a one-day workshop and interactive discussion on what it means to be caring for a person with a brain injury, how to get the physical and medical support locally and how to develop coping strategies. Without this program, the carers I spoke with would not have had the opportunity to come together. While they felt supported by the workshop, the problem is that it just went for one day, and there is little support, funding, infrastructure or help in regional Victoria for them to access.

Many of the people I spoke with told me stories of isolation and difficulty in getting services or finding respite care to assist with the care of their loved one, particularly within the local area. One said—but many suggested: 'We just don't have the money to drive the 200 kays to Melbourne every week to get the help we need.' Additionally, carers spoke of the difficulty in caring for their own mental and physical health whilst

caring for somebody with an acquired brain injury and the difficulty in coming to terms with the changes within their lives and the toll it had taken on their family.

Some had children who had been involved in violent crimes, leaving their child who was about to enter adulthood dependent for life. The recount from one mother was quite chilling: 'My daughter was slashed with a knife at a nightclub when she was a teenager. As a result, she lost control of one side of her body. She cannot get the vital support, equipment, therapy and care that she needs to have some quality of life. As a direct result of the crime, my husband committed suicide. He just could not cope.' This story, for me, highlights the complexity of this issue and the breadth of support required for these families.

Similarly, I recently attended a disability education and day respite centre in Castlemaine, in central north Victoria, and heard from the parents of the Mount Alexander Shire Accommodation and Respite Group, who, given the concern they have for their children having to leave home in order to receive the care they need, especially as these parents themselves age, have sourced land to build their own specialist accommodation centre in the town of Castlemaine to ensure their children stay within their own community.

I and, I am certain, many others cannot imagine our children living away from home and from their communities, especially without their consent. However, that is essentially what we as a society are expecting the children of these families to do. The project is bound in red tape, and these families are desperate to find a solution. They have kept pushing for years and years to get an outcome. I just do not think it is good enough.

The land for the facility has been donated by the local Lions Club, country service organisations and individuals who understand the importance of keeping families together. The local community bank and the state government have both committed financial support to the project and I look forward to lobbying the federal government to also commit funds to the centre's construction.

Across the breadth of country Victoria, these three experiences have highlighted to me the ongoing crisis for those with a disability, and their carers, living in regional areas. Specifically, the three themes that I can pull out of those three experiences are that the access to services and support in regional areas for these families is sporadic, that there are real challenges to resource long-term accommodation and respite opportunities, and, highlighted to me by Thelma from Traralgon, who has been fighting this battle for 30

years, the importance of continuing to fight, continuing to advocate, continuing to champion—even though it seems like nobody is listening—the special challenges of those living in rural and regional areas with a disability and their carers. I thank those individuals for their honesty, for sharing their stories with me and for their resilience in continuing to campaign on this important issue.

Indigenous Education

Senator THISTLETHWAITE (New South Wales) (22:08): Last week I had the pleasure of welcoming a very bright, young Indigenous student from Mildura, Victoria, to my office as part of the Learn Earn Legend! message to young Indigenous Australians. With the aim of encouraging and supporting young Indigenous Australian students to stay at school, get a job and be a legend for themselves, for their family and their community, the Learn Earn Legend! program addresses three of the key Closing the Gap targets on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reform. The first is to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children within a decade. The second is to halve the gap for Indigenous year 12 equivalent attainment by 2020, and the third is to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians within a decade.

The program is delivered by community leaders, sports stars and everyday local legends who young Indigenous Australians respect and aspire to be like. The Learn Earn Legend! message advocates the importance of education, training and employment. This message was one that I was certainly happy to support last week, and indeed, have been happy to support over many years. I am pleased to say that the young student who was based in my office, Kimberley Appo, came to see how this place works and to work alongside my staff and myself. She was a wonderful student who, I hope, learned a lot and drew much inspiration from her time here in our nation's capital.

While in my office, Kimberley performed many tasks, one of which was to write a speech about her experiences in Canberra. I am pleased to say that I am delivering that speech to the parliament this evening. Kimberley came to Canberra in the hope that she would experience and learn the ins and outs of government and break down some of the mystique of what we do in this place and in the House of Representatives. She was interested to know how, and why, decisions are made as well as to see and meet other Indigenous students who had also excelled in their secondary studies and were learning the processes of how laws are made in our nation's capital. She was surprised and delighted to see the large number of Indigenous students who had also travelled to Canberra during that

week. She expressed amazement at just how many of her Indigenous contemporaries are participating in the program, and how many of them stood up as wonderful success stories for their local communities and this nation's Indigenous youth.

Kimberley came to this place from Mildura, Victoria, a town with approximately 50,000 residents and home to the heart of an expansive wine and fruit growing region. She is currently completing year 12 at Mildura Senior College, which was opened in 1912 as Mildura High School but which has been known as the Mildura Senior College since 1995. To reflect on the changing nature of educational delivery in schools, Mildura Senior College focuses on the two most important years of an individual's schooling, years 11 and 12. The college offers a wide variety of subjects and is very helpful when it comes to pathways for the future.

Kimberley is enjoying her last year of studies and has worked hard to excel in her subjects of psychology, further maths, English, physical education, and health and human development. Kimberley has a passion for young children and she explained to me her background, her plan and her wish to go on to study primary school education in Queensland. She has her university picked out and is very focused about her career. I was very impressed by her enthusiasm and her commitment for primary school teaching.

Kimberley was born in Mildura in 1994 and was brought up in the small town of Robinvale before she moved to Queensland as a result of some family problems. Whilst living in Queensland, her elder brother who was 22 at the time became severely ill with chicken pox. Despite receiving treatment at Royal Melbourne Hospital his health continued to deteriorate. He subsequently came down with pneumonia and suffered two strokes, resulting in paralysis down the left side of his body. Luckily, her brother was strong and it was thanks to his fighting spirit that he managed to pull through, but, unfortunately, he remains partially paralysed. But he leads a normal life, which doctors had informed Kimberley's family he would never be able to do. In her words, it was a miracle.

At the age of 10, due to ongoing family issues, Kimberley moved in with her 19-year-old sister who was pregnant at the time. Despite their trying circumstances, Kimberley's sister managed to raise her, and she did a fine job. At the age of 10, due to ongoing family issues, Kimberley moved to live with her 19-year-old sister, who was pregnant at the time. Despite the trying circumstances, Kimberley's sister managed to raise her and she did a fine job. If it were not for her sister, Kimberley said, she would not have been in the position to benefit from such an informative trip to Canberra, and she certainly would not have made it

this far in her educational attainment. Unfortunately, many young Indigenous Australians who have come from trying family circumstances do not often get the support and opportunity to further their education and, indeed, to make trips to our nation's capital. Kimberley was very grateful for the role that her sister played in raising her. She is now the proud aunty to six beautiful children. Family is the most important thing in the world to her because, as she said, they are the ones who were there first, the ones that taught her everything she needed to know to survive and the ones who will always show her pure love.

Kimberley's family is from Bundaberg, Queensland. Her mother comes from the Aboriginal tribe Goreng Goreng and her father from Cullalee—both Queensland tribes. From 1894, her grandmother and great grandfather on her father's side were brought up on the Purga Mission in Ipswich. Kimberley also boasts Sri Lankan roots, with both of her grandfathers being descendants from a Sri Lankan background. She is a great example of the multicultural lineage that many Australians have.

As for the future, Kimberley wants to succeed in her education and become a mentor for young individuals who have also come from broken homes and who have experienced difficult childhoods. With a plan to attend university to study primary school education, I am sure she will go on to make a real difference to the lives of many Australians.

Kimberley said to me that she really enjoyed her time during her visit to Parliament House, and I am pleased to say that she learnt about the process of considering, debating and enacting laws on behalf of the people of Australia. She described her week here as an amazing experience and was pleased to finally have some sort of understanding of how laws were made and the processes of government, which she said she ordinarily only sees on the news. During her two days in my office, Kimberley spent time working alongside my staff, finding her way about Parliament House and understanding how laws were considered, debated and made as well as how the processes and roles of the parties and, indeed, the media worked within Parliament House. She was also very excited to be given the opportunity to sit in on question time, which she described to me as an interesting experience.

Kimberley Appo is a delightful young student whom I was very pleased to welcome into my office this week, and who I am sure, with the added help of great initiatives such as the Learn, Earn, Legend! program, is in for a very bright and fulfilling future. I see her as a very good ambassador for young Indigenous Australians—in fact, in many respects a legend herself.