**Interview with Deb Haygarth and Liz Wright**

We acknowledge that these podcasts were recorded on the traditional lands of the First Nations Peoples of this country. We acknowledge their Elders, past, present, and emerging. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded, and that this is, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

From the Outskirts is a series of podcasts featuring women with disabilities who live and work in regional Victoria.

I’m Liz Wright, a disability activist and advocate. I’m also the Manager of Community Inclusion and Women’s Empowerment at Women with Disabilities Victoria.

All the interviews were recorded in each person’s home or workplace, so from time to time there is unexpected background noise.

We hope you enjoy.

Artist, musician and social justice activist, Deb Haygarth, has campaigned for women’s and workers rights since she was a teenager.

From standing in picket lines to running the Barwon Hub for Women with Disabilities Victoria, Deb is a fascinating woman.

Deb

Hi, I’m Deb Haygarth, and we're meeting today on Wadawurrung Country.

Liz

Deb, it is so lovely to be able to have the opportunity to have a conversation with you. I just wanted to start off with, where were you born? Where are you from?

Deb

Oh. Inner city Melbourne. South Melbourne I was born and raised until, oh, I think until I was about eleven, and then we moved to another inner-city spot, Newport.

Liz

Yep.

Deb

And then back to South Melbourne again.

Liz

So, whereabouts in South Melbourne? Were you living like close to the water?

Deb

I was living close to…oh, the Nepean Highway, that end of town, walking distance to the city. It was great, I could always walk home if I missed the last tram.

Liz

Yeah, that's fantastic. Do you have good memories of that time?

Deb

Yeah, very good memories. I loved it.

Liz

Have you got siblings?

Deb

I have four siblings. I have three brothers and a sister. An older sister and…yeah, three brothers.

Liz

And where do you fit in the picture?

Deb

Oh, in the middle. I'm a middle child.

Liz

Me too.

(laughter)

Liz

We've got that in common. So, I like that. What was moving to Newport like?

Deb

That was a bit different. We moved into a milk bar, so I worked in the shop, a lot that was pretty good. I put on a bit of weight though because I could eat all the lollies.

(laughter)

Deb

That was terrible. But yeah, no, that was good. And I went to Williamstown High School, or girls school as it was then.

Liz

Uniform or no uniform?

Deb

Oh, uniform. Yeah. Yeah.

Liz

Formal.

Deb

Yep. Yep. Kneel on the ground and measure up to see how long your skirt is. That sort of thing.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

Have to wear your beret and blazer on the way home.

Liz

Yeah. What did you folks do for a job? Did they run the milk bar when you moved to Newport?

Deb

Mum ran the milk bar, but Dad was a wharfie, and he has been a wharfie for years. And so, he continued doing that and Mum ran the milk bar. So, yeah.

Liz

Yeah. So, are we taking sixties, seventies here?

Deb

Sixties. Late sixties.

Liz

So, we're talking kind of the beginning of the big union kind of protests and change around the wharves and the docks and all that sort of stuff.

Deb

Yeah, you are. My father had a lot of time off and on pickets and all the rest of it. And, um, yeah, there was a lot of argument with schoolteachers when my sister would go to school and say something about Dad being on strike and there'd be a repercussion from the teacher and then Mum would be down the school having a go at the teacher.

Liz

Oh, that's really interesting. I think South Melbourne is steeped in a lot of kind of working-class, social justice issues around, you know, just around work ethics and stuff like that.

Deb

Definitely.

Liz

Do you think, do you think that's where you got your kind of growth around social justice from an early age?

Deb

I have no doubt that's where I got it. Yeah. No, definitely. I had…my father was a wharfie, my uncles were wharfies… later on my brothers were wharfies. My ex is a wharfie, you know…

(laughter)

Deb

And you know, I just sort of have this thing…and we picketed and we, you know, whenever there was something on… the night, ‘96 I think it was… strike down on the docks, the MUA strike at Swanson Dock, I spent six weeks down there. It was amazing. And yeah, it was pretty incredible. And the…camaraderie and support from each other was brilliant.

Liz

From the different unions coming in to support each other too?

Deb

Yeah, that was the best bit when the builders labourers come in, oh when the CFMEU came…in the morning, we’d been standing all night, and we had a helicopter above us with a spotlight down on us. It was amazing.

Liz

Such intimidation.

Deb

It was…we had all the police, like that many police in front of us, but we were all standing linked arm to arm.

And then seven in the morning, when all the builders had come to go to work, they all decided to come down to Swanson Dock instead. So, there was just hundreds of a marched up behind the police. So, the police just had to separate, and they come up and they said: OK, guys, you should go and have a rest, we'll take over.

Liz

I love that.

Deb

It was just brilliant. It really was. And I mean, I had my… my mother was there, my son was there, my daughter, my ex-husband was there. I was just such a…

Liz

That like such a powerful…such a powerful act to actually rebel against, you know, what was seen as kind of diminishment of rights and the ability for people to be able to work in a healthy, safe way.

Deb

Yeah.

Deb

It was. It was trying to get rid of the unions and the biggest union of all. And it ended up becoming a people's… yeah… a people's fight. And cause they had the big march in Melbourne, which I was really lucky to be asked to hold the banner in the front row, which was amazing. And I think there was like 150,000 marching.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

It was huge and that was a lot of… just people in the community. It was a community march as well as the wharfies is of course, but it was huge.

Liz

On a practical level, if you’re standing up all night had how do you go the toilet?

Deb

Well, you don’t.

Liz

You just hold on?

Deb

You just hold on…

Liz

Oh God.

Deb

Yeah, it was really difficult. I ended up passing out at one stage. They went and got me some oranges to eat.

(laughter)

Deb

What have I come to?

Liz

Oranges?

Deb

Well, oranges. They thought it might have been diabetes or you know…

Liz

Yeah. Wow.

Deb

But there was something, but it was just…yeah…well, I had MS, and I didn't realise it at the time, but I was just…yeah. It was just that whole pressure of standing and, yeah.

Liz

So, if you had MS and didn't realise it at the time, so tell me about that?

Deb

Well, I had my first attack of MS when I was 23 and I had optic neuritis, which nowadays, if any woman was going with optic neuritis, they just automatically have ‘em checked for MS.

Liz

What's neuritis?

Deb

It's inflammation of the optic nerve. And so, I had all…they didn't know if I had glaucoma. They weren't sure what it was and sent me off to a specialist and he says: No, it's optic neuritis. But he didn't know about MS, because this is a long time ago, we’re going back 40 something years…

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

And so, he just told me: Go home, it'll go away eventually.

Liz

Hmm and isn't that interesting about women's health?

Deb

Yeah.

Liz

You know, it'll go away or lose weight.

Deb

Yeah, well, he told me that when he sees it, it's generally just with young women…

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

And that's typical, cause that's what MS does.

So, anyhow, for years after that, I would have different problems. Like my hands not working properly, losing balance really badly, like even trying to rinse my hair in the shower and nearly falling over…

Liz

Yup.

Deb

Yeah, all sorts of things like that. Different sensations I was getting in my legs and hands, but the doctors all kept telling me there was nothing wrong with me.

You know, if I said my legs were playing up, they’d X-ray, my hips, and they’d say: There's nothing wrong with you, go home.

And so, 20 years that went on for until I couldn't walk, and I wasn't able to walk properly, and that's when I went to the doctor and he, he told me to go home…

Liz

So how did that manifest? Did you try to get out of bed one morning, and were just like, this is too wobbly, I can't do it?

Deb

No. No. I had my daughter living with me and she says: Come on Mum, let's go for a walk in the morning. And I said: Yeah, OK. I couldn't make it to the corner without really dragging my leg and not being able to walk properly and asking her if I could hold onto her. And she kept saying: Mum, stop it, you look strange, don't walk…And I'm saying: I can’t help it.

Liz

How old was she?

Deb

Oh, probably 19.

Liz

Oh, so young enough to be embarrassed by any difference in appearance.

Deb

Yes, exactly. Exactly. So, she was really quite…not concerned…more…yeah, more embarrassed.

(laughter)

Deb

But then I went to the doctor and said this is getting beyond a joke. I really… I thought I'd had a stroke. I really did. I thought I've had a mini stroke.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

And he said: I'll X-ray your hips, again because I wasn't walking properly. Kept asking me where the pain was and, and says, I got no pain. I says: Everything's just numb and heavy.

Liz

Why just do hips and not your knees on your…?

Deb

This is just doctors’ so…

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

Oh, no, your hips are fine… and I just burst into tears and says: I'm not leaving here until you promise me, you'll find out what's wrong with me. And he said: Come back in a week. And I went back in a week, and he said: Ever had problems with your eyes?

Deb

I said: Yeah, I had optic neuritis 20 years ago. And he says: Bingo, I think you've got MS.

But it took that time to get it. But in between I often wonder what I would have been like had I been diagnosed early.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

But would it have stopped me from doing things I did? I've done a lot of things that I really probably wouldn't have done had I known I had MS because I would have been trying to protect myself.

But, you know, we built a mud brick house, I’ve poured slabs at friend’s places. We've done lots of things. I mean, I come home exhausted and just fall in a heap.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

And I was always told: Oh, you know, you’re always bloody tired, what's wrong with you? You know, this sort of thing within the household. But I just pushed on. But had I known I had MS, I probably wouldn't have done those things. And I sort of wondered whether it's good or bad. I don't know. Mixed feelings about it.

(Music playing)

Liz

Yeah. Tell me about your mud brick house, what was that like, building that?

Deb

Oh, that was another. That was strange. That was good. Now, I must say it was good. We had the kids and everything, and I…

Liz

So how many kids you've got…

Deb

I've got three kids. Yeah, yeah, I've got two girls and a boy. And they were only…well they weren’t all born when we moved to the country. But it was one of our things…Both my partner at the time and me were both from South Melbourne and we wanted the kids to grow up with a horse and goats or whatever, and we knew the only way to do that would be to move to the country and you know, we were sort of alternate lifestyle thinking and wanted to make a difference and not leave a big footprint. And this is back in the late seventies. So yeah, it wasn't even thought of back then, you know.

Liz

But yeah, perfect for a hippie lifestyle. Yeah.

Deb

Oh Yeah. So off we went, and made all the bricks, built the house, and lived in a caravan on the property for…we had 12 acres on the property… for a number of years and while we built the house.

It was hard work. It was bloody hard work. We had no power. So, we used to charge…have our lights in the caravan from the battery on our car and we always had the car parked on a slope so...

(laughter)

Deb

So, we could jump start the car the next day…

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

And then we eventually got to move into the house… before… when it was locked up. And that's a big mistake because once you get in, you go: Ooh we’re in….and it takes you a lot longer to finish it…

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

But it got done and it was fun. And the kids liked that. The kids had, you know, we lived in the middle of Lillicur Forest up in Talbot.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

And they had the forest for their backyard.

Liz

How lovely.

Deb

Yeah. And we had goats and… yeah, goats and we had lots of things… horses and we had one goat was in kid one time. And they went down and said: Mum, it's having babies. And I says: Oh, youse watch because we had some friends around. So, they went down to watch the goat have the kid, and it had the kid. And they said: It’s had one, and then they said: Mum it’s having another one. And I went: Oh, well, that's pretty good having twins for its first kidding.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

And then they’ve come up and said: Mum it’s having another one. It had three, three kids it had, on its first kidding. So that was pretty exciting for the kids.

Liz

So, at this stage were you still having symptoms or noticing symptoms around, you know, hands and legs and stuff, but it was all just taking it in your stride because you're building a house, raising three kids…and three kids. Yeah, as well.

(laughter)

Deb

Yeah. Look, I honestly thought I was getting old when I was 30, you know, I was like, Oh my God, I'm just so old. I'm just I feel it. Yet I was always…for the work I was doing, I shouldn't be feeling like that. And it just didn't make sense, and nothing made sense. But it was just, push on. Just push on.

Liz

So, while you're on that the property, were either of you working mainstream jobs or were you just working like off the grid and using…like being sort of self-sustainable?

Deb

We were doing all sorts of things. My ex was building muddies with another guy. They were…so they had their own business doing that. And he also worked on farms doing….yeah, just anything on the farms that he could do.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

I did different things. I was a signwriter and painter, and I was originally a screen printer, but I sort of got out of that and went into doing signs and things. So, I was doing menu boards for the local wineries in Avoca.

Liz

So, painting or chalk drawing…?

Deb

Chalk. You know that yeah, the pastels, they are pastel menu boards. Yeah. And that too, that sort of stuff. Oh, and painting too. I must admit I did. I was up on the roof one time writing ‘souvenirs’ on the front of the shop, and my girlfriend told me I spelt it wrong, and I was just beside myself with worry all the way back into town with my dictionary just to double check.

(laughter)

Liz

Had you spelt it wrong?

Deb

No. I hadn’t.

Deb

I was paranoid because, you know, souvenirs, it is one of those words…

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

And I started to think, maybe I did spell it wrong. You know, it was a huge sign right across the top of the shop. Yeah.

Liz

So, had you always been kind of creative?

Deb

Yeah…

Liz

Like as a kid too?

Deb

Yeah, as a kid, I was drawing Oh, God. From nine, ten years old. The lady down the road was having art lessons, and she would….this is when we were in the milk bar….and she was telling me about them…and so Mum… she told my mother: Get her some paint, pencils, and things. She really likes this. And so that was it. Mum went out and got me some, you know, folios and pencils and pens and what have you and I was into it then and I just loved it. I drew all the time and, and then when I got to secondary school, I wanted to be an art teacher, but they wouldn't promote me to year 12, even though I passed every subject in year 11.

Liz

Why not?

Deb

Because they were just mongrels. So, they wouldn't do it.

Liz

Were you at South Melbourne?

Deb

I was at Albert Park High when this happened.

Liz

Oh Yeah. Yeah.

Deb

The year before… the year 12 was the first year 12 out of Albert High, because it was a new school...

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

And its year 12 were better than JH Boyd and Mac.Robb's High which was…

Liz

Wow.

Deb

You know, their pass rate was better, and I think they were just wanted to keep the pass rate up really high, and they didn't think that I would do it for that…I would have. But I hadn't studied at all in year 11. I just was too smart, and I just didn't need to.

Liz

Yeah, there is a little streak in some people isn’t there. And I say this about my family as well, where we’re like: Oh yeah, oh yeah, I’ll just do it later, or not at all, or just fluke it. Sometimes you get caught out.

Deb

Yeah, well I mean like I said, I passed every subject. It wasn't that bad. I probably could have passed it with high marks that's the only thing, but I had full intentions of doing the right thing when it come to year 12, because I wanted to go to university.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

So… but then Mum was…it was different time back then…and Mum says: Don't be stupid, just get a job.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

Yeah. And so yeah, she wouldn't fight for me. So, I went OK, so I went to get a job, but I said it's got to be in art, and I ended up getting an apprenticeship in screen printing and I was the first female qualified screen printer in Victoria, which was pretty special.

Liz

I would be super proud to be the first woman to do something.

Deb

Yeah.

Liz

That's amazing.

(Music playing)

Deb

I've done lots of different things, I suppose working when I moved to the country, then it was back to screen printing and then I did the signwriting and everything because…when you do screen printing, you learn how to write, you learn how to letter.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

It was…maybe not so much now because it's all computer driven now. This was pre-computer, so everything was hand done and you worked in the dark room with huge cameras and different things. So, when it come to doing signwriting, it was really just, you know, just a different way of doing it.

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

I had all the skill, so…

Liz

When did you get involved in kind of social justice issues? Like I know with the, you know, the wharves and your family history and stuff like that, when did your feminist streak come out?

Deb

I think I've always been a feminist. I really do. Even as a child… I've always been concerned for women and concerned for all sorts of things like that. I've seen things happen.

I remember coming home from school on the tram one day, I would have been 15, I know I got into trouble off my mum because I didn't get home in time, I'd been down the beach, and I jumped on the tram…we was… were going down the tram. I looked out the window and there was this guy punching this woman and she's holding a newborn baby…

Liz

Oh.

Deb

And I'm screaming at the tram conductor to stop the tram and that this…and there were people on the tram, and no one took any notice.

So, I jumped out of the tram and ran across the road. I don't know what I was gonna do, but I thought even if I could get the baby off her…

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

I could hold the baby…

Liz

Yeah. Yeah.

Deb

And by the time I got there, they’d jumped in a car. They both got in a car, but there was a shop….it was in the doorway of the shop, and I yelled at the people in the shop: Have you rang the police? And they said: No. I said: Well ring ‘em.

And I was just annoyed that no one could see what was happening with any ounce of concern.

Liz

It's probably that whole don't get involved.

Deb

Yeah.

Liz

You know that mindset of you know something… something's going to happen to me if I get involved, and that's just wrong.

Deb

Well, it happened to me because the police came and then I had to wait and speak to the police, and I got the number plate of the car and everything. And while the police are holding me up talking, my mother's got in her car to come down and find me because I'm so late coming home from the beach. So, she's jumped out the car and said: What have you done?

Because the police are talking to me. So, the police had to calm her down and tell her, No, no, no, no, no. She's done the right thing. Don't have to go at her, a but yeah…so, it's been a long time.

Liz

Yeah. You've been involved in a few different actions and protests and things in recent years, and I know I'm jumping all over the place a little bit with my questions.

Do you want to talk a little bit about the stuff that you've been involved with? And basically, as the Hub Facilitator at Barwon, you've got the Hub involved in some actions as well that have been public and you know, with other organisations.

Deb

Yep. We've done a lot… of course the MeToo movement and stuff like that, we’ve pushed that and got people from the Hub to go and march in that, which is… which was a really good… we had a bit of a lot. Can I just mention something it's a bit different from this…

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

We were going into the march, and I had a woman with me who's blind and she didn't have a dog with her and so she says: Can I push you in your wheelchair? (because I had a push wheelchair) And you, you guide me. And I said: Yeah, sure.

And so, I've got her pushing me in the chair. But we come up and there's a real rough, rough part in front of us and I knew if she pushed me onto it, I’d probably tip out and there was some policeman sitting over on the other side of it and I says: Just stop here for a minute. And I yelled at to the police and they come, yeah. And I said: Can you come here? And I says: Would you mind helping us across this bit? And they looked at us like we was stupid, you know, I says: Look, she's blind and I can't walk. And if she can't see where she's going, she's liable to tip me out.

Well, they couldn't believe it. They’re going: You’re kidding? She's blind? I said: She’s fine, she's holding onto my chair. I'm telling her where to go. I've told her to stop. So, they helped us across there. And then she pushed me right through the march. It was just great. But that was the MeToo march…

Liz

Yeah.

Deb

Oh, we've done Reclaim the Night, of course…we marched in that…

Liz

You’ve participated in that quite a bit.

Deb

Yeah, Yeah, we've done that. We've done that a couple of years and we've marched with the women in that, because that's a huge thing and everybody in the group feels it is too.

Oh, we've done a few things. We've, we've had a play that we had run in, in Geelong and it was all about mental health, and it was just to get the message out there about mental health, and that was on Mental Health Week, and we were lucky enough to get the CEO of the Sane Organisation to come and open that and… and have a talk. So that sort of reached a lot of people in Geelong that probably wouldn't think that way. And it was a brilliant play because it really showed you all the different types of mental health there can be.

Liz

What's your biggest passion?

Deb

I care for what's happening in this world. I care for what's happening in Australia, overseas, like what's happening in Iran at the moment is just shocking. What they did in America with the abortion laws is shocking.

Liz

Oh. Yeah. That’s shocked me.

Deb

And…these are the things that are my passion, I think, and I tend to do a lot of time looking and reading and…and listening to things that are happening around those things. That's probably my greatest passion. I mean, I have passion for other things, like I have passion for music and for art and things like that. But my really gut wrenching, moving passion would be for the injustices that are happening in this country and around the world.

Liz

Yeah, and my next question was going to be, biggest frustration. And it's kind of like your passion and your frustration are the same thing.

Deb

Exactly.

Liz

What's your biggest bugbear for today? Could just be for today.

Deb

No, look, just my biggest bugbear, all round is that I am losing independence. I can't drive anymore and that, that is probably the biggest one.

I need to depend on…whether it be taxis or whether it be someone else to take me places. And I'm not used to that. I was…I could drive and do and go wherever I want. And you know, that's my biggest bugbear, I think.

I mean, I can, I can cope with what's happening, but I'd love to be able to get out. And you do tend to lose friends and things when you're in an electric wheelchair, people…you become a bit hard…you know?

Liz

People become a bit…see I don't think you become hard. I think people lose sight of what friendship is, and the and the convenience once that is compromised…

Deb

Yes.

Liz

Cause, you know, popping over for coffee or meeting somewhere upstairs…

Deb

Yeah.

Liz

And then people just get lazy.

Deb

Yeah, well, I got invited to a New Year's Eve party, which I was so excited. All these people, I hadn't gone out with for such a long time. And I said: Is it accessible? And they said: Yeah, there's only one step at the front door and then it's accessible after that.

And I didn't go, I didn't even answer. I just thought: Well, what's the point? You know, seriously, if you don't know what accessible means. And I thought: Nah, I won’t go.

But others…I've got a 60th birthday coming up and that's going to be accessible and that'll be fun.

Liz

Yeah. What do you think your next big adventure is going to be?

Deb

I want to go interstate. I had considered going overseas. I've never been overseas, but I haven't seen all of Australia yet. So, I'd like to go to Western Australia, and I'll have to take someone with me because I won't be able to do it on myself…on my own. But I mean, that's totally me being very self-centred and wanting to do something for me, you know, and that's going to be my adventure, I think. I need to do that. I haven't done that for ever…

Liz

Self-centred?

Deb

Well, not self-centred….

Liz

It’s not.

Deb

That was probably the worst, worst thing to say…the wrong word.

Liz

I think it sounds like a lovely adventure of going to see something great. I feel like it's something you probably deserve to do and would love.

Deb

But yeah, we'll see how I'll go with that. That will happen in the next 12 months, I reckon. And it's just a matter of getting the right person to come with me. But this is all in my mind at the moment. But yeah…it’ll happen.

Liz

But that’s how planning starts.

Deb

Exactly.

Liz

I guess, in conclusion, apart from your activism with protesting and social justice and working with Women with Disabilities Victoria…your feminist streak has also led you to be involved in some proactive dancing with Helen Reddy…

(laughter)

Deb

Well, I don’t know…I wasn’t dancing *with* Helen Reddy…

Liz

Well, she was singing….

Deb

She was singing…and it was actually around the time that she brought out I am Woman. It was, yeah, she just brought it out and I was probably 15 and I was at a ball, as what they called it in those days, the evening gown and all the rest of it. And you took your own grog and what have you.

So, we had an esky under the table. And when she started singing, I am Woman, I just couldn't help myself. I pulled the esky out, stood on the esky, put my fist in the air.

I was the only person in the whole hall… which she looked over at me and nodded at me because there, fist in the air and on top of this esky singing every word with her. And I’ve loved that song ever since. And I think she was a great woman for bringing it out and releasing it. It's something that needed to be heard.

Liz

Yeah. Oh, thanks Deb.

Deb

No worries

Liz

Thank you so much.

Deb

No. Thank you, Liz. That was really good.

(Music playing)

LizTo find out more about Women with Disabilities Victoria go wdv.org.au