**Interview with Liz Wright and Jenny Godwin**

Liz

This is a Women with Disabilities Victoria podcast.

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.

Jenny Godwin is a do-er. Renovator of multiple houses, restorer of furniture and French polisher. Jenny is also the Hub Liaison Officer at Cobram Community House for WDV. Jenny, like her daughter Nikita, has a busy and interesting life, travelling kilometres around the region to do the things they love.

Jenny

Hi, I'm Jenny Godwin. I’m in Cobram on Yorta Yorta lands.

Liz

Hello, Jenny, it's Liz right here. I'm in Cobram on a sunny winter day, and it's quite beautiful here. What brings you to Cobram and why are you here?

Jenny

My family came here when I was a teenager. And I've lived here since. I’ve wandered around, but always come back here.

Liz

And you're working here at Cobram Community House. What's the Cobram Community House like as a place to work in?

Jenny

Awesome. Yeah, it's great people. Lots of different people. Lots of people coming in with training or just for help or…yeah, all kinds of things, really. So, lots of different people using the space.

Liz

And what's your role here?

Jenny

I'm the Moira Hub Liaison Officer for Women with Disabilities Victoria and running the Hub here for women with disabilities.

Liz

And what does that involve?

Jenny

So, each month we have a meeting, and we bring in guest speakers. The women actually elect things that they would like to learn about or people that they would like to meet, or even different things like they would like to learn different ways of de-stressing. So, we would bring in people to actually facilitate that.

Liz

And how long have you been in in this role?

Jenny

About four years. Yeah, since the Hub actually started after the Enabling Women program.

Liz

So, tell us a little bit about that. How did that all come about?

Jenny

So, it started down there was quite a few enabling women programs around the region. Shepparton was the initial one, then Wangaratta and then it came to cross to Cobram. So, I was a Mentor for the women's program in Wangaratta, which was run by Women's Health, Goulburn, Northeast and Women with Disabilities Victoria. And I was a Mentor for a couple of the women who actually did that program.

And then from there when it came across here, then I was the Mentor Coordinator.

Liz

So how did you how did you find the program, being a Mentor Coordinator is a big responsibility because you have to work with people that you primarily don't know but are matched up with because of, you know, various reasons. Did you enjoy that role?

Jenny

Yes, it was a good role, actually. It was interesting and as you say, met a lot of different people who I sort of knew of, but, you know, people who I knew actually recommended other people. So, it built a great network and sort of met lots of interesting people from all different roles, all different walks of life. So, yup, really enjoyed that.

Liz

OK. So, prior to all of this, so prior to enabling women and working here at The Hub, what sort of other work or interests have you had over the years?

Jenny

Primarily, I was actually a French polisher. So, for many years I worked in my own shed restoring antiques and rebuilding furniture, etc. But every now and then I'd get sick of the shed, and I'd go and work in different places. So, I'd worked for IBM. Yeah, I'd always sort of volunteered. So, I've done different roles in emergency relief and stuff like that.

So then eventually decided that's where I should train. I trained in community service and development and then started sort of working in this field.

Liz

Wow. Well, that's a big difference from French Polishing.

Jenny

Huge.

Liz

Both require a lot of patience, though.

Jenny

Yes. Yeah. Both are actually what you do have to have a lot quite a lot of patience. And also, both are actually quite sort of analytical where you actually have to stop and keep figuring. So, they're both constant challenges, which I like.

Liz

And they're both long term prospects. Like French polishing isn't a paint job overnight. It's quite…you have to be disciplined and tenacious to get a big piece done, don't you?

Jenny

Yes. Yeah. Yeah, you do. You do to look more at big picture and sort of be constantly figuring what next, what needs to be done next. And yeah. To be quite sort of tenacious with it.

Liz

So, are you doing any of that now?

Jenny

Not a lot now. Just do my own pieces now when I have time.

Liz

Yeah. You sound pretty busy because you also have another job as well.

Jenny

Yes.

Liz

So, you're working at Bunnings?

Jenny

Yes, I work part time at Bunnings as well. So, they're quite, quite different, but also in a way sort of quite similar in that yeah, you're sort of more visible at Bunnings. So having a disability and being out in the community to me is also sort of pretty important.

Liz

Yeah, visibility is a hugely important factor in displaying disability without it being just a word on a page really.

Jenny

Yes. And it's, you know, if you're talking proper community service and development, then that's really taking it out into the community. And actually, well, it's almost like a form of education really, that, you know, just having a disability doesn't mean that you can't do things.

Liz

Yeah, sure. Do you live in Cobram?

Jenny

No, I live in Yarrawonga.

Liz

How far away is that?

Jenny

It's about 35ks, so yeah, not, not too far but, still on the Murray, which is good.

Liz

And just across the border to New South Wales as well.

Jenny

No. It’s still Victoria, they're both border towns so but so there's Yarrawonga is the Victorian side and then Mulwala is the New South Wales side.

Liz

Right. So, if I was to move to Yarrawonga or Cobram, tell me a bit about the culture of the town of both towns, like what's it like here in regional Victoria? I move here, Liz Wright, as a non-driver, moves into a house as a single person, how am I going to move about? What sort of things can I do here?

Jenny

You'll be staying in your own town quite a lot. There's not a lot of public transport so that's a really big issue for our region is lack of transport and that is a big factor here. So, both towns and tourist towns. So, in that way there's sort of quite a bit to do in the actual towns themselves, but with moving around the regions is it's quite, that's quite difficult.

You sort of have a bus, generally a bus to your sort of nearest major town a couple of times a day, same sort of thing to Melbourne. So yeah, transport within the areas is huge.

Liz

So, if I was to go from one town to another, I could be there for a few hours before I am able to get back home.

Jenny

Yes. Yes.

Liz

You'd want to plan your trips.

Jenny

Yes. And you'd want something to do for the day because if you were going for a half an hour appointment somewhere. You’ll have quite a few hours to, to do you know, sort of kill in between being able to get back to where you live.

Liz

And it's sort of one of the issues that the women from the Hub have brought to your attention as well as you being a local resident yourself.

Jenny

Yes, Yes. Primarily around and around the regions. If you don't drive, it is a big issue. So, you know, people's main mode of transport is actually them driving themselves or taxis, which is quite expensive as well. So, when we're working with the women, part of our role is to enable transport so the women actually can participate in things.

Liz

So even if you provide a cab charge, is it likely to be reliable that people can get a cab to the meeting or is it more organising a pickup?

Jenny

No. It actually depends upon the town. Some towns are more reliable than others. It's sort of also towns that have their own taxis. You know, some of the smaller towns the taxis will actually go to from Cobram, there'll be a taxi go out to take out Katamatite, which is about 20k's away.

Liz

Yeah.

Jenny

So those people would be reliant on the taxis coming to them and being available really when they needed them.

Liz

Well, it's kind of problematic isn't it really. Because that adds an extra cost to an individual if potentially, they're living on a disability support pension or NDIS or NDIS assisted, sorry. If you're not working for a lot of money that adds to your financial stress and on socio economic level, really.

Jenny

Yes. And it is one of the things that we find that the women do have to factor into their decision making around what they're doing. A, is there transport available or else do they actually have money for a taxi or is there somebody actually who can help out, but it sort of makes dependence on other people who might or might not be available. So that is actually part of their decision making.

Liz

OK. So, you at times would have people that can't make it to the Hub because of a transport issue.

Jenny

Yes. Yes.

Liz

OK. How many members of the Hub would you have?

Jenny

Generally, around sort of 12, 14 people.

Liz

And varied age group?

Jenny

Very varied, yeah. Yeah. So, you know, sort of early twenties up to women in their sixties.

Liz

That's a nice inter-generational blend though, isn't it?

Jenny

Yes. Yes. And they generally, yeah, they get along quite nicely actually.

(Music playing)

Liz

That's good.

Liz

So, Jen, how long ago did you start being a wheelchair user?

Jenny

So, I was 14 when I got in the wheelchair. I had transverse myelitis, which is an infection in the spine after having the chickenpox.

Liz

Is that very rare?

Jenny

Yes, it is fairly uncommon, but more to the point, it's fairly uncommon to do with major damage as what it did with me.

Liz

And the major damage was all spinal?

Jenny

Yes. Yeah. So, I'm actually a complete paraplegic.

Liz

14 is a difficult age to acquire disability. Do you recall - and this is probably almost redundant to even ask this, but I bet you can recall in detail feelings, and you know, the drama of the time. The drama and the trauma of the time?

Jenny

Yeah. Yeah. So, what - I was standing on a netball court and I fell down and within half an hour I was completely paralysed. But it took six days, I think, for them to figure out what had happened and why I was paralysed. So that was huge and that was why I did so much damage as well, because it took so long…

Liz

For the diagnostic bit.

Jenny

Yes. Yep.

Liz

So, were you ambulance away from the netball court?

Jenny

No, my dad actually came and got me, which was pretty cool, so he just came and picked me up.

Liz

Fireman's lift?

Jenny

Yeah, took home.

(laughter)

Liz

Really, Fireman's lift?

Jenny

Yeah, he literally just picked me up cause I was yeah, you know a fairly scrawny kid…so, he just picked me up and took me home and yeah, calmed me down and all the rest of it and yeah, we went to the hospital from there. For each of the times, yeah, for quite a while when I moved, he just carried me.

Liz

Wow. So, you were in the hospital for six days before a diagnosis? Or were you in hospital six days and longer because of the diagnosis?

Jenny

So, I was in hospital for a few days, and they actually misdiagnosed it. They just diagnosed it as hysterical paralysis, which is interesting.

Liz

Oh my God, that sounds like from the yea olde worlde days.

Jenny (laughter)

Well, it was interesting in that, you know, basically they said, well, there's nothing wrong with you. It's all in your head. You need to go home. So, I did go home, but yeah, Mum and Dad weren't really very happy with that, and neither was the local doctor. So, he actually did more investigating and a friend who was actually a paediatrician, he diagnosed it very quickly.

So, then from there I went to Melbourne, and I was in hospital for the next three months from that point.

Liz

God, what's it like being a teenager in hospital? Like it’s a huge change from being on the netball court, running around, being at school to being like, Were you physically sick and in pain? Or you were just paralysed?

Jenny

So no, I was just paralysed. There was pain for the first few weeks while I was in an infection, but then from there it was a lot of learning because I actually had to learn everything again. So, you know, from going to the toilet to being able to transfer to using a wheelchair. So really to completely operate and live again.

So, it was busy. There was a lot of weightlifting and things like that to develop strength, you know, to be able to move without using your legs, really. So that was that was the main thing. It was it was busy. So, there wasn't actually a lot of thinking time really.

Liz

Did you have friends that visited you from school?

Jenny

Yes. Yeah, Yeah, I did actually. When I was whenever I was in local hospitals, they'd come in. So yeah, that was, that was I guess a bit of normality.

Liz

And then how long was it before you returned to school?

Jenny

That was probably the hardest part, actually. Because I got out of hospital and it was literally the following week, went back to school like nothing had happened. So that's just, you know, I still look at it now and think it's just bang on bizarre. To actually, go from that where you're sort of still learning to go to the toilet and to operate again and then you go back to school with a heap of 14, 15-year old’s who are talking about boys and discos and clothes and things, which to you is so irrelevant. That it's just weird know it's hard to fit back into.

Liz

So how did you manage it?

Jenny

Probably not well, yeah…I wasn't much longer…probably a year and a half of school and then left school. So, I left school very early. I moved out of home quite early as well and just went do my own thing for a while.

Liz

Was that rebellious independence?

Jenny

It was rebellious independence, but it was also it was also moving with older people who probably more life experience too, I guess. And weren’t sort of, you know…clothes were not relevant. Clothes were not important, you know, all of that sort of stuff. Whereas to my age group, that was the sort of thing that they were interested in, that they were, you know…so I moved into a different world, I guess, which was a much older world. And with people who were more experienced.

Liz

How did you manage to like, share housing and things like that in, you know, if we're going back quite a few years, you know, I don't imagine accessibility and ramps and things were at your doorstep. So how did you manage things, you know, newly disabled but also managing new environments?

Jenny

My parents were probably pretty awesome with that. Dad built a ramp, and that timber ramp came with me to multiple different houses. So, wherever I moved to I’d just set up a ramp at the front of the back door, which was ever easiest. Generally back door. And that just followed me around and then a chair just thrown into the shower and that was the modifications to the house. So, it was all fairly, fairly simple really.

Liz

Yeah.

Jenny

And not complicated. And I think yeah, that was probably one of the best things about it because nobody really complicated things. Whereas now there's lots of rules. Yeah, lots of things that are supposed to happen. But yeah, it was pretty simple actually.

Liz

And what was your first job?

Jenny

Oh, my goodness. So, before I got in the wheelchair, I'd worked picking fruit, so that was probably my first job. Then when I got in the wheelchair, I worked as a kitchen hand. So that was my first sort of proper paying job. And then when I left school, I was just 16, so I went and worked as, as a secretary, sort of clerk, doing books and answering the phone, doing all that sort of stuff.

Liz

And did you find it easy to get work? Like what was what was the kind of perception of you as a young woman all those years ago? You know, like easy or not so easy?

Jenny

Yeah, I didn't I think because I was known in the community and it was a small community, that made things easier. So, yeah, I did just go for a job interview and get a job. And people were generally quite nice actually, when I worked as a kitchen hand, I'd actually gone for a job as a chef, having no clue how I'd manage as a chef and the head chef was awesome.

(laughter)

He took me on as a kitchen hand and said, work over the summer and then tell me what you think of becoming a chef. And he sat down with me after I'd worked through Christmas and everything, and I said to him, well, I don't want to really be a chef anymore. I can't see in the pots, and there's no way in the world that I could actually lift those pots and then move the wheelchair.

And he said, I know, but I wanted you to figure that out. So, I think that was pretty awesome, actually.

Liz

Yeah, I think so too. Rather than just making that decision on your behalf and not giving you the benefit of the doubt of having, you know, wisdom to see what you what you can and can't do.

Jenny

Yeah, yeah. And it was, you know, it was nice. He actually let me, let me realise that by myself rather than just canning your dreams constantly.

Liz

So, what about romance? Did you start dating at any point? Tell me to mind my own business if you don't want to answer.

(laughter)

Jenny

Yeah. No, I was a pretty typical kid in that way. You know, there was different boyfriends and a partner, and you know let's get married and let's not, so all the usual things really. And then yeah and then I met someone and we, you know, we had a house together and all that sort of stuff in my early twenties.

So, in that way everything was quite normal really. You know, in inverted commas type thing. I made normal decisions and, just followed them through and as I said, had awesome family that they'd always just allowed me to make my own decisions and encourage me to make my own decisions, be they right or wrong and yeah, sort things out from there.

Liz

So, you ended up partnering up with somebody and having a child?

Jenny

Yes, I did.

Liz

What was that like as far as…and I'm not digging here…I'm just curious to know how the hospital was with, you know, a young paraplegic woman having a child.

Jenny

That was interesting because I wasn't really young. I was actually 37. So, it was already quite set in my ways of, and quite sort of was happy to make my own decisions and be quite vocal about it. But also, they were what I’d call bang on useless because they, you know, it's a country area so there's not a lot of people, particularly in wheelchairs.

So, their experience with a paraplegic having a baby was not huge. So yeah, that was probably more problematic than anything, which actually, you know, but having said that, again, I was very lucky. There was a couple of doctors who were working with the Women's Hospital in Melbourne, so they were also happy to refer back to people, which was good.

Liz

So how old is your daughter now?

Jenny

So, she's 16 and a half. Yeah, nearly 17 actually.

Liz

And is she like you?

Jenny

Yes. Yes. She's pretty, pretty stubborn, pretty fiery. And into everything, which is good. Yeah. So, she's a busy kid.

Liz

What sort of things she do?

Jenny

So, she kayaks She plays the drums, which is pretty cool. And the glockenspiel.

Liz

That's pretty unusual.

(laughter)

Jenny

It is rather. So, she's in the in the band at high school, which is good. And yes, she loves horses, loves horse riding, loves running. But yeah, as I said, into everything really.

Liz

So, would you say she's a proper country kid?

Jenny

Yes, I would. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Liz

You can't imagine her living in the city as yet?

Jenny

No, no, she's sort of she's already talking about, you know, I'll go away to study, but I don't want to live there.

Liz

Now Jenny, you've got Nikita your daughter, but you also have a partner, and he has a daughter. Can you talk to me a bit about Matt and Lily and how they fit into your world?

Jenny

So Matt is my partner, as you say, and yeah, and then Lily is his daughter and she's actually the same age as Nikita. So that's pretty cool. So, she's just turned 17. Yeah. So, they get along quite nicely, which is all good.

Liz

And they're very different kids, aren't they, as far as hobbies and things?

Jenny

They are, yeah. They're quite different kids, but they, as I said, they do get along quite nicely, which is awesome. And they both love art actually, which makes it pretty cruisy, there's always one of them painting something or doing something.

Liz

And what's Matt like?

Jenny

Probably as weird as me. Yeah. So, he loves renovating as well. So, he has a broken house as well. The houses are about an hour and a half away from each other and they're both equally as broken, so it's always interesting who's doing what and who needs to fix what and what tradies are coming in. So, everything is always sort of booked out with next, next.

Liz

That sounds like between the four of you, you're all super busy.

Jenny

It is pretty busy. Yeah. Yeah. And we cover a lot of miles, actually. That's one of the things we see lots of the region. The kids are at school in different towns, different activities, etc. So yeah, it does make it busy, but interesting.

Liz

What sort of mileage do you reckon you do a week?

Jenny

I don't know how many I do per week actually, but yeah. Around between 40 and 45,000 Ks per year on just my car. And then Matt would do the same sort of thing in his car.

Liz

Yeah. This region's quite spread out, isn't it?

Jenny

Yeah.

Liz

What would be the kind of distance between you know, is it like…I know on the Bellarine Peninsula it's approximately 12k's between each little town. It's bigger than that here, isn't it?

Jenny

Yes. Yes. So generally, 30, 30 to 50ks. But like, you know, to your next major town, it would generally between sort of 50 to 100Ks to your major town. So, from there you rack up, you know, you rack up a lot of miles very quickly.

Liz

So, you know, I think probably if you think about that, that perspective of having to rack up a lot of miles is a lot of time taken out of your workday as well. And I think if you compare that to a lot of metropolitan workers who aren't doing a giant commute, it's no wonder you're, you know, tired and don't watch TV.

(laughter)

Jenny

Yeah, Yeah, Yes. By the end of the day, the last thing in the world that I want to do is sit down and watch television or even social media. I don't do social media just for the simple reason that by the end of the day, by the time everything's finished, you know, and all the jobs are done, etc. the last thing in the world I want to do is look at a screen. So no, I don't do any of it. Just relax.

(Music playing)

Liz

Now, Jenny, I know you're really, really busy and you cover many, many miles dropping Nikita and Lily off of the bus. Things like that. You know, driving 35 K's from Yarrawonga to Cobram for work and working at Bunnings, all of those sorts of things that you need to do in a country town. But you also have a big passion that involves your car which is op shopping and looking at pieces of furniture to restore because you're again renovating a house. Talk to me about your love of renovation.

Jenny

I do love renovating things and I do love taking things which have broken and discarded and making them like new again. So, I think that's…and that's how I look at it. And it's lovely to look at something and think, I wonder what it was like before, let's see what we can come back to.

So, yeah, I do love renovating, whether it's houses or furniture, all kinds of old things. And as you say, I love op shops.

Liz

Yeah.

Jenny

So yeah. And you know, finding treasures is just exciting.

Liz

So, you're sort of renovating is anything from chipping bricks to painting to, I don't know…preparing wood for floorboards and things like that. If you wanted to do up a piece of furniture as well, how long does it take to say, do up a dresser?

Jenny

So generally, I'd look at around a week. Yeah, because yeah, then that would be knocking it apart, rebuilding it, stripping it, sanding it, re-staining it and then polishing it. So, all of that process I generally look at around a week. So, if you know, you’re still working and stuff like that, then I'd try and, you know, do a bit of a job each day.

You know, you'd have it in clamps, when you come home from work. Then on the weekend you'd be stripping it and sanding it and stuff like that. But yeah, it's sort of, it's, it's a lot of time and it's probably more juggling than anything else because, you know, on the weekend you need to, to fix everything up and do washing and etc. etc. And then still be trying to renovate the house as well.

Liz

You've got a history of renovating houses. How many have you done?

Jenny

This one's number four by myself, and the yeah, with my ex-husband there’s a couple as well. So yeah, I think it's six, that yeah have been properly renovated.

Liz

Wow. I'm kind of envious because I need to buy in that kind of help. So, with this house, this beautiful old house, what is it? Is it an Edwardian?

Jenny

So, it's Victorian and it’s 1886 we think. It's an old house in Yarrawonga but this one’s brick, so it's been more complicated. Timber’s easier, brick is more complicated. We found than that. Yeah. They're much harder to restore actually, but it is quite beautiful, and it will be quite beautiful when it's finished.

Liz

And it's not going to be your last, is it?

Jenny

No. (laughter)

Liz

So, it's a hobby.

Jenny

Yeah. Yeah. I keep saying I'll stop it and then I'll just get a proper house that’s not falling down, but we'll see how that goes.

Liz

I think you'd be too bored without renovating.

Jenny

There would be a whole lot more time. I'd need more hobbies. Maybe I'd go back to the furniture, but yeah. Then with that, what do you do with all the furniture?

Liz

Well, I know you've got a lot of chairs…

(laughter)

Liz

But there's an irony there seeing as you don't really sit in them.

Jenny

Yes, Matt my partner. He keeps saying. So, when are you actually planning on sitting in any of those chairs? And it’s just like, no, they’re just pretty.

Liz

They're just pretty. Yeah.

(laughter)

Jenny

So yeah, that is it is pretty ironic. But yeah, I do have far too many chairs and I do look at them and then think, OK, they are pretty, but now what?

Liz

Well, you know that you can always do that big sale.

Jenny

Yeah. Yeah. We keep looking at it and saying, you know, giant, giant clearing sale type thing. Yeah. And get rid of all the excess furniture. Maybe one day.

Liz

If you were going to describe yourself within a paragraph…this is hard I know….what would you say about Jenny Godwin?

Jenny

Stupidly stubborn.

(laughter)

That would be the first thing, yeah stupidly stubborn. And fairly determined would be the next thing. Once I decide something, my dad says to me, is that a when or an if?

(laughter)

And I think that pretty much…that sentence pretty much describes me, and I’ll generally turn around and say, well, I've already spoken about it, so it's when.

Liz

Wow. Thank you so much, Jenny. It has been lovely talking to you today. I wish you all the best with all of the proposed jobs you've got coming up. And it's been great to get to know you. Thank you.

Jenny

Thank you very much.

(Music playing)

Liz

To find out more about Women with Disabilities Victoria go to: wdv.org.au