



A Differently Abled Life

by Sheena Kaighin

Sheena is a former radio broadcaster, reporter and producer who was also a freelancer for Britain's Press Association. She retired in 2008 when her husband John was posted to Alaska. Sheena is currently enjoying Perth where John is the Marine Terminal Manager for Prelude. Apart from enjoying the varied Outpost events Sheena's main hobby is singing. Later this year she will represent the Australian region with her chorus when it competes at the word championships for women barbershop singers in New Orleans.



'If you want a problem solving – ask a staff member with a disability'.

That was the message to Shell Australia staff at the launch of the latest enABLE network in Perth.

The guest speaker was Bob Nolan a retired Shell staff member of 35 years who is deafblind (pictured above with author Sheena Kaighin, and below at the enABLE launch).

Bob attended the launch at the invitation of Shell Australia Chair Zoe Yujnovich, who is the sponsor of the enABLE Network in Australia.

Bob is a little surprised that it's taken so long for it to be established in Australia. "But it's a very welcome move" he says.



I meet Bob on a day trip to Rottnest, a small Island 18 kilometres (11m) off the coast of Fremantle.

Rottnest has achieved global fame thanks to a small native inhabitant, the Quokka. Not heard of the Quokka? Google it alongside Roger Federer or Chris Hemsworth. You will join the millions who have fallen for this cute marsupial.

Bob is off on a tandem bike ride around Rotto (Australians shorten every word they can) with his friend and former line manager George Rorie. George, who has never ridden a tandem, is looking anxious. Bob on the other hand is not bothered in the slightest. "It will be fine," he says.

Bob didn't tell recruiters at his first Shell interview that he was deaf. "I wanted to be treated like everyone else. Luckily my speech has always been good," he says. At the time he didn't know he was going blind. Now he only has three per cent of his vision left.

I'm here to tell people with a disability that a successful, fulfilling career with a multi national is not only possible, but can bring enormous benefits to a company like Shell," he says. "People with a disability are great problem solvers, their lives force them to become experts at it on a daily basis. They see the world from a different perspective. It's a talent pool Shell cannot afford to ignore".

Twenty per cent of the world's population has a disability.

At the launch of enABLE Zoe Yujnovich tells the staff audience, "We (Shell) must be a reflection of the wider community".

I talk to Bob about the use of terminology, and he tells me one of his many stories about life on the road during his Shell career. "I came off the plane in Bangalore at midnight and the queues for customs were massive.

I saw one that was empty, it read 'Diplomats and differently abled people' and I got straight through. I told them I was a diplomat of course," he laughs. "But I do like the phrase differently abled, because that sums up us all".

Shell, says Bob, could not have been more helpful in helping him make his work life easier especially in providing the latest technology. "Whatever I asked for I got". Simple changes like everyone consistently walking on the same side of corridors meant he stopped bumping into people all the time.

Establishing good meeting practices where only one person speaks at a time was also vital.

"Of course, that helps everyone," he points out.

He was also the keeper of the office secret. "I lip read, so I learned things I shouldn't have, and sometimes would have preferred not to," he jokes.

During his talk at the enABLE launch Bob hands around some dark goggles for everyone to try. They only have a small circle of light in the middle. They demonstrate how Bob currently sees the world. I watch as they are passed around the room, and see the realisation dawn on everyone's face of just how big a challenge Bob has on a daily basis. I was humbled. I'm sure everyone else was as well.

Back on Rotto, Bob and George return from their cycle around the Island. Along the way they've been snorkelling at some of the pristine beaches the island is known for. They've also watched the antics of the island's New Zealand fur seal population, although spotting quokka as they shelter in the shade has proved a little difficult for Bob.

At lunch Bob goes off to explore on his own. We look worried for a second, before we realise Bob has been doing this all his life. He's run marathons, cycled the length of the U.K. mainland from John o' Groats to Land's End with his wife Louise, and along the way has raised tens of thousands for charity.

Apart from his family, he is most proud of his work as Chair of both DeafBlind Scotland and Deafblind U.K.

George can be proud too, it turns out he was a natural up front on the tandem. "I told you it would be fine", says Bob. I get the impression that with Bob, failure is never an option

Later, on the packed ferry back to Freemantle Bob goes off to the top deck to see the views. He's currently learning Braille for when his sight disappears completely. He was told he would be completely blind by the age of 25, for now he's using that three per cent while he still can.

I've rarely met a man making the most of a differently abled life!

