

Salthouse Sistas

WAVE (Women in Adult and Vocational Education) has created Salthouse Sistas, an initiative aimed at making a change in creating networking opportunities to build the confidence of young women living with disabilities within the workforce.

By Claudia Simich

An Australian of the Year is recognised for their outstanding contribution to the community and nation. The courage and determination that one individual portrayed is still an inspiration to many. Awarded the 2020 ACT Senior Australian of the Year, Sue Salthouse devoted her life to social justice by playing a huge role in the systemic advocacy for women living with disabilities. In memory of Salthouse, an initiative was brought forward earlier this year by WAVE to create a network for young women with disabilities. The project aims to encourage change by creating networking opportunities whilst simultaneously building the confidence of these young women. Paying respect and in tribute, the foundation was named *Salthouse Sistas*.

In Australia, it is the sad truth that people with a disability are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed over those without. Added to this dismal statistic is that women with a disability are even less likely to be employed than men with a disability. Women with a disability have lower incomes from the employment that they do secure, however are more likely to experience, not only disability biases, but gender discrimination in labor markets. National WAVE Convenor, Linda Simon, spent most of her working life as a teacher, in schools then at TAFE, involving herself in the work of the teachers' union.

“I strongly believe in the rights of all people, not just those who are wealthy and wield power. As a woman, I saw and experienced areas of injustice and inequity, many arising due to gender and lack of power,” says Simon. Her involvement in WAVE developed from her hope that she could “help address these inequities within vocational education and training and give a voice to the women who work and study in the sector”.

WAVE is a national network of women involved in VET (Vocational Education and Training), adult education, research and the field of work-related education and training. The organisation provides advice, submissions, and advocacy on behalf of their members and works to promote social justice and equality through organizational policies and practices.

“When I became involved with WAVE, I met Sue Salthouse and couldn’t help but admire her courage and determination as both a woman and a woman with a physical disability. Sue was always the first to remind us that we needed not to just campaign around women as a homogenous group but needed to consider the specific requirements of women with disabilities,” says Simon.

In Western Australia, initiatives like this are few and far between. When long-term member Sue Thompson and Sarah Leftwich, WAVE’s WA coordinators, proposed the idea that the organisation should undertake a specific program, tailored to supporting young women with disabilities and establishing a network that would provide direct support with the objective of employment opportunities, it was met with support. Linda Simon comments “it seemed to me a good opportunity for WAVE to help remember Sue in this way”.

With Australia having one of the lowest employment participation rates for people with a disability and the rate of disabled women obtaining employment being even lower than men, Simon says it is critical that the support for women with disabilities is accessible and visible, which she doesn’t think is always the case. “Support groups often seem to work in isolation from other groups, making it more difficult for young women to recognise the most appropriate paths. We hope that we can have the network recognised and supported within WA initially, both at a government and adult education level, so that it is one of the networks and opportunities available for young women with disabilities.”

A typical morning for Tayla Taseff starts early. With the help of her mum, she begins with stretches and physio exercises, before being greeted by her support workers who help her get dressed and “fueled up for the day”. With her positive attitude and determination, nothing seems to get in the way of Taseff’s goals and ambitions. 22 years ago, Taseff was born, three months prematurely with Cerebral Palsy, a congenital disorder of movement, posture and muscle tone, which affects 6% of our nation’s population. “Despite it being a difficult diagnosis for myself and my family, it doesn’t stop me from living life to the fullest, even on wheels,” says Taseff.

With the advocacy of disability and women’s rights being at the forefront of her mind, Taseff welcomed the opportunity of taking on the role of Project Officer for WAVE in 2021, the major task being a driving force of the new Salthouse Sistas initiative. The ongoing battle is

very real for people with disabilities securing work. Only 64% of people with disabilities have full time employment, opposed to the 82% of the able-bodied population. “The project’s objectives were perfectly suited for me, given that I am a young woman with a disability who is passionate about helping others and also struggled to get a job in mainstream employment.” Taseff highlights the importance of feeling supported and encouraged as a disabled woman entering the workforce, as she has first-hand experience dealing with the ongoing prejudice and discrimination that is still prominent. “This is due to the mainstream workforce, in my opinion, having little experience with people with disabilities in open employment, thus it is a new avenue for them.”

Taseff reiterates the importance of this initiative and how much disabled people can bring to a role and provide a different outlook. “My end goal for Salthouse Sistas is for it to be a platform to educate employers on the importance and economic incentives of employing an individual with a disability. Not to mention their reliability and punctuality, along with the minimal amount of sick leave they take in comparison to a neurotypical person. This is because if they are given the opportunity to show their skills then they feel a sense of inclusion and contribution to society.”

“Mongol”.

“Mong”.

I have never heard these words before now.

I have since discovered that these are derogatory connotations from many years ago, associated with an abusive insult against people with Down’s Syndrome and other special needs people in the 1970’s. Unfortunately for Sue Thompson, it is a term all too familiar. Growing up in the UK, this type of language was “incredibly hurtful but quite the norm” when used to refer to her sister Julieann.

Julieann was born with Down’s Syndrome, a genetic chromosome 21 disorder that affects approximately one in 1,000 babies born worldwide. “We were told that Julie would likely not live beyond the age of 20, so for a long time, we treated her as if she might pass away tomorrow. It was a strange way of thinking about my sister, and we didn’t really relinquish the notion until Julie herself reached 30,” says Thompson. Since the 1950s, the change in life expectancy has been dramatic. 70 years ago, children born with Down’s Syndrome were not expected to live past the age of 15 years, however it now approaches 60 years. The change is

a result of advancement in medical resources and most importantly, social attitudes towards people with disabilities. “It was becoming clear that people with Down’s Syndrome were living much longer than previously and also achieving much more,” adds Thompson.

When Thompson was younger, she and her brother would enjoy taking care of their sister, but there was an underlying sense of occasional resentment. A feeling as though they didn’t matter as much to their parents as Julieann did. Julieann had a serious bone condition when she was very young, spending long periods of time at Great Ormond Street Hospital, where Thompson’s mother would be required to accompany her for extended durations.

“I found this very difficult when I was a little girl but there was no outlet for discussing those feelings. I think that’s different nowadays and children who grow up with siblings with disabilities are given much more support.” Thompson is a member of WAVE, convenor for WA, active in bringing the Salthouse Sista’s initiative to life. “I hope that the group will empower young women with disabilities to connect with one another and to speak up to employers including the big companies and organisations,” says Thompson. “It would also be good if Salthouse Sistas could get a long-term source of income so that Tayla (Taseff) and other young women, both with and without disabilities, can be employed to do what they’re doing on a permanent basis.”

Salthouse Sistas celebrates the life, work, vision and memory of Sue Salthouse, ACT Senior Citizen Australian of the Year 2020. Sue Salthouse was not born with a disability. She broke her back in a horse fall in 1995, at the age of 46. During her life she experienced both perspectives of ability and disability. Tayla and Julie have not experienced life without their own challenges.

The importance of our government and community supporting this initiative and developing similar programs is significant in encouraging change to maintain the conversation of discrimination in the workplace; what Salthouse devoted her life to advocating for. “Women living with disabilities experience both direct and indirect discrimination when trying to find a job, but they can also simply find that they are invisible. There really is some truth in the saying that there is power in numbers. These young women will support one another, as well as developing their own creative solutions and ideas,” adds Thompson.

It takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to enforce change. There is power in numbers and the more groups we have like Salthouse Sistas, the more visible people with disabilities will be. It will force us all to consider the needs and aspirations of everyone as equal. We have a duty to prolong and cherish Salthouse's legacy. We owe it to her to do so.



Sue Salthouse accepting her ACT Senior Citizen Australian of the Year Award in 2015. She will forever be remembered for her leadership and advocacy.

Photo credit to: The University of Canberra