

JOEL'S JOURNEY

Our guest speaker at the recent Foundation Dinner was Mater Dei parent, Di Beers, who shared the story of her son, Joel. At the request of many, Di has given us permission to reprint some of her speech.

My son Joel is 16 years old and has been attending school at Mater Dei for six years. Joel has a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder with a moderate intellectual delay and also Tourette Syndrome. Now at 16 he is 6 foot and 2 ½ inches tall. He has a beautiful smile and a kind heart and I think of him as my gentle giant.

Joel was Greg and my first born and arrived with a little difficulty weighing in at a healthy 4.1kgs. He met all of the important milestones and was generally a happy “normal” child. A few months before Joel turned two years old we moved to Malaysia so Greg could take up a new position for his company. Joel adjusted fairly well but around the time Joel’s brother Ben was born, we started to notice some worrying behaviours. Joel became very distressed every time his brother cried and sometimes even tried to smack Ben on the head out of frustration. Later we realized he had a sound sensitivity to a baby’s cry – a very common feature of Autism. Joel then started to flap his hands in a peculiar way. It was sort of like a wave but not! It had us completely baffled.

Shortly after Joel’s third birthday we returned to Australia to discuss our concerns with our GP and were immediately referred to a Paediatrician. After one visit with a Paediatrician we were given the diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) which, back in 1997, meant very little. We had seen the movie ‘Rain Man’, starring Dustin Hoffman, but that was our only ‘experience’ of Autism – if you could call it that. Naturally we were totally devastated and overwhelmed.

In 1998 our second son, Benjamin, was also diagnosed with ASD. I think you can all understand how completely heart broken we were at that time.....

Joel was fortunate to attend a special Autism school at Wetherill Park for six years where he received specialised intervention. Like most Autistic children he developed many obsessions over the years which included; washing machines, toilets, drains, bicycles, Madeline books and videos, the Eiffel tower, the colour blue, the M4 motorway, pink donuts, electric fences, the Blue Mountains, ghost trains, monsters and sandwich makers (particularly Breville ones). By the time Joel

left the Wetherill Park school he was producing large quantities of drawings every week.

Since Joel started at Mater Dei he has become quite a social young man who loves to chat to anyone who will listen, particularly at present, about sandwich makers, Halloween or certain members of staff and students he has become obsessed with. Joel has become a very competent swimmer and his artistic skills continue to develop. Joel is a very generous young man who likes to please. Many members of the Mater Dei staff have a 3D sandwich maker, a portrait, a drawing or a birthday card Joel has made for them. A highlight last year was the framed portrait of Frank Pitt which was presented to Frank at the End of Year Mass.

Joel has been involved in the Living Skills Program (formerly FRP) at Mater Dei now for almost four years. He attends it two nights per week. Through the Living Skills Program Joel has learned so many new skills. He loves to help with the shopping and cooking and makes his lunch for school. Now at home Joel will; make his bed, empty the recycling box, take out the garbage bins, empty the compost bin, set the table and bring in the washing.

Joel’s journey at Mater Dei has not only changed his life but mine. Before Joel started at Mater Dei, I always had the support of a few wonderful friends and family but unfortunately none were local and so I felt very isolated. When Mater Dei invited parents to become involved in a volunteer run canteen over four years ago my life completely changed.

During the first 12 months of our Mater Dei canteen experience (which only occurs one day per week) a group of approximately 10 mothers formed a very close bond. We have all become the best of friends because we all completely understand each other’s lives. We listen to each other, we give advice if needed, we cry during the tough times and we laugh when we share some of the funnier moments. I could not imagine our life now without those amazing and inspirational friends in my life.

Joel has also made some wonderful lifelong friends at school from all age groups.



I would like to finish by describing Joel’s future..... according to Joel.

One of the wonderful traits of Joel’s personality is his positive outlook on life. He does not see that he is different to anyone else and he has absolutely no inhibitions. Joel is going to have his 18th birthday party at the Fright Night Theatre Restaurant in Liverpool, where he will drink “blue alcohol or have a beer” just like his cousin. He wants to learn to drive and get a job. His top two career choices would be to work for Breville, making toasted sandwich makers, or to become a Teacher at Mater Dei.

Joel also plans to marry his girlfriend, Olivia Leadbeater (who is currently only eight years of age), in Paris, France, where they will both settle down somewhere near the Eiffel Tower.... to live happily ever after!