

# LACHLAN'S STORY



There's a photo on our mantle piece at home. In it there is me, my husband Mick, our son Lachlan and his brother Corwin who was eight months old at the time. It was taken on the drive-way of our home, on May 29, 2000. It was the morning of Lachlan's first day at Mater Dei. He's five years old, wearing the old uniform of lemon and royal blue and smiling the biggest smile. I'm smiling too but behind the smile I recall feeling very anxious and quite a bit scared. I'd been fussing all morning over the three men in my life – worried we'd be late for Lachlan's first day at school.

I remember arriving at school and Mick was videoing Lachlan and I was scolding him to stop videoing as it was taking too long to walk down the path and we were going to be late!

Well, we ended up not being late and Mick carried Lachlan the last few metres up on his shoulders. We were there. Around us were lots of other families – most looking as nervous and excited as we were.

Lachlan had started in the inaugural year of the "School Starter's Program." This was intended to be a one-year intensive program with the aim of assisting children to develop the skills they would need to be enrolled into their local Kindergarten or Year One class the next year. But by the end of Lachlan's first year at Mater Dei, I had realised that what I really wanted for him was to be in a school where he was accepted, respected, had fun, and was a full participant.

I had to make this decision on my own, as my husband had died only a month after Lachlan started school. We had been part of the Mater Dei community for just a few weeks, yet the level of support from staff and parents at that time and since was and has been extraordinary. This was one of the first experiences I had had of the extent of love and support that is Mater Dei...

One of the biggest events in our life recently has been Lachlan starting the Family Resource and Residential Program (FRP) in 2009. Jenine Purdy, Manager FRP, had started planting the idea of Lachlan attending in my head the year before. (I am convinced this is a tactic generally employed by Mater Dei - to slowly introduce parents to the Next Big Step in a gentle manner.) This was not an easy decision for me and I truly agonised over it. I am sure my friends were completely "over it" by the time I decided to give it a go.

I was worried that Lachlan would not cope. I am sure this won't be the last time he proves me wrong, but prove me wrong he did. My fears were put to rest the day we went to our orientation visit at

Teralba (one of the four cottages in Mater Dei's Residential Program). Lachlan, as usual, did not speak the entire time we were there, and he looked a bit nervous. Then on the way home I was going over again how he would have sleep overs at Teralba with Kyle (one of his friends from school), go on outings, and so on - and that one week his brother and I might come and have tea with him. Well, quick as a flash Lachlan piped up, "then you go home!" I knew right there and then that this person who I still thought of as my little boy, my vulnerable son who needs so much care and protection.... well he was now an almost 14 year old adolescent who was really looking forward to some time away from his mum!

Since he has been attending the Residential Program he has literally grown up before my eyes. Yes, the beginning of a moustache helps with the grown up look, but it is in his behaviour and the responsibility he is taking for himself that it truly shows. Because of what he has learnt in Residence, he packs his own school bag and gets his jacket from the wardrobe. He helps make his own lunch. He makes his bed. He turns the shower off on his own. He even cooks dinner one night each week (under supervision and always involving sausages).

The other benefit from Residence has been the time I have been able to spend with my younger son. As much as I had underestimated Lachlan's potential to develop skills, I had also underestimated the need for Corwin to have time with me away from his brother. As a parent I had been focussing on my child who was living with intellectual disability, my child who was living with autism. Well, having this time alone with Corwin has reminded me that he is also living with disability and autism, and it is really nice for him to have the occasional break. (We discovered the simple pleasure of seeing a movie at the cinema without Lachlan echoing the last phrase of every sentence!)

Lachlan has four more years at Mater Dei. I am certain they will bring new challenges and lots more belly laughs. Still, there are times when I find it hard to accept that we need other people in our lives to help us care for Lachlan, but I am now seeing the need to allow this to occur and the benefits it has provided to Lachlan and our family.

Mater Dei is not only my son's school but a place of learning and support and care for our family. Mater Dei has, gently, led me to understand that Lachlan will one day be a man who will live his own life, although he will always need the support of people who care about him.... much like the rest of us!

Paying the electrician to repair the fuse box after Lachlan put a full load of wet clothes into the dryer? - \$80

Finally locating a gardener who could repair the hedge after Lachlan gave it a "trim" - \$100

Having your 14 year old adolescent offer to fold the washing (and put it away!) - Priceless.

**Trish Hedges**



*Lachlan at Residence with Social Educator, Rhonda and friend, Julian.*