

Living Options: New Beginnings

My son Logan is a 21 year old man with Down Syndrome, Autism, Dyspraxia and mild intellectual disability.

Recently on our Facebook page I posted a video of Logan in action at the Living Options training café in Alexandra, Central Otago.

I would like to share our incredible journey over the last three years with you all, the highs and lows in the hope it will give others the insight, that great things can and will happen for our children and families.

February 2016 saw a rare weekend away for me without Logan and while on a ride along the Central Otago Rail Trail, I came alongside a young 18 year old woman with Down Syndrome and her support worker out for a Saturday afternoon ride. I still distinctly recall the soft toy elephant in the basket on the back of her bike. As Logan was around the same age, like all of us parents, I was keen to spend a few minutes riding and talking with them to see how other families, individuals and their parents handle life's challenges in what for most of us is a murky, uncharted journey.

We spoke only for 5-6 minutes, but that 5-6 minutes was to majorly change our lives!

I was explaining life with Logan and my worries and fears for the future with the support worker who asked me "have you heard of Living Options here in Alexandra?"

Living Options is an organisation which came about by the vision of one woman who saw a need for families of special needs people and owing to her compassionate nature, formed the foundations of this organisation from her own home. Living Options Charitable Trust was set up in Alexandra in 2001 to provide support services in Central Otago for people with intellectual, physical and sensory disabilities enabling them to live independently in their own community. Prior to that such people often had to leave their family and community in order to receive the services they required. In recent years Living Options has extended its services into the Queenstown/Wakatipu area.



Above: Logan and his father Nigel are going to the Hugo House to enjoy a well deserved family holiday at Lake Hayes later this year.

Individuals are encouraged to take control over their own lives and to have input into any major decisions affecting them. Support is flexible, focusing on the person with the family and whanau involvement. Living Options has an activity centre in Alexandra providing recreational and educational opportunities and training in life and social skills.

Upon returning from my weekend away I embarked on researching and discovering what I could learn about this place. Once I established contact we travelled up for a couple of visits with Logan, who clearly was totally at ease and loved being there. Finally he was in a place where he wasn't judged, could comfortably be himself and was accepted by all for the person he is.

I was desperate for Logan to have an amazing life in a warm, safe, loving environment and Living Options clearly met my vision for Logan. This is a service provider which clearly puts the emphasis, not only on the individual but also firmly on the family and the care management and staff provide is exceptional.

As we were Invercargill based, and clearly there was nothing of this calibre there and a future that was uncertain, January 2017 saw us purchase a home in Roxburgh (30 minutes south of Alexandra) which we rented out while familiarisation with the area and upcoming changes were implemented for Logan.

Twelve months later I took the biggest gamble of my life, sold up everything and moved up full-time so Logan could attend the centre during the day and work towards a permanent residential contract ultimately seeing him living as independently as possible while having full support when needed. This was a journey that was going to test us all and would either be a success or a failure, and I was extremely hesitant to leave what I already knew, however to keep everyone happy, and to give Logan the best opportunity possible, I made this move.

This was a tough period with days starting at 5.30am, commuting 42.4km into Alexandra (at times in foggy, icy, white out conditions during winter), dropping Logan off, facing a full day at work before collecting him at the end of the day and returning home. Then began the usual regime with Logan sorting him for the evening before settling for the night so I could finally sit down, usually 10pm for a breather and bed before the following day saw the same routines present themselves.

I was also struggling with issues from my own childhood in this area and working in the town and seeing landmarks everyday was impacting more on me than I thought they would. It was difficult to come in daily to a place that harboured many unpleasant memories for me.

This daily grind took a major toll on me with constant tears and breakdowns, but each time management at the centre would promptly sit me down, make phone calls, and juggle rosters just so Logan could have 3-4 nights in a house so I could have a breather. These periods were instrumental in me keeping my sanity. The many years of living a life with a disability and daily issues ultimately took its toll on my relationship and in November 2018 my partner of 17 years and I parted ways.

This had been coming for quite some time and the only silver lining was Logan's direction in life and the vision I had for him over the last decade particularly was coming into fruition. Logan is now thriving in his new environment and as of March this year is now under a full-time residential contract. He lives in a flat with two other flatmates/friends and is involved in all aspects of running a household, including chores and meal preparations with full support when needed. The

interaction with his peers is amazing and his progress in a very short time astounds me.

With the help of CCS in Alexandra, and in conjunction with Living Options Logan has a supported job working with and exercising puppies in a local boarding kennels and soon will also be working watering plants in the garden section of a local retailer giving him the same things we all need in our lives, a sense of self-worth, belonging and a team member whose contributions are valued.

Thursday afternoons from 1.30 – 3.30pm Living Options run a training cafe which is open to the public with everyone involved in various roles, whether it be taking orders, plating up, being a waiter or waitress, clearing tables. It's not uncommon for up to 70 people to come and support this incredible venture. All the food is cooked, made or baked the day prior, once again with all members of the centre being involved.

Thanks to this amazing place, management and staff second to none, I now have the support I need to finally, after 21 years, get some of my life back which I will admit is exciting, but is also taking a bit of getting used to!

Sitting here writing this and reflecting I guess the point I wish to share with you all is this... I've battled agencies, been knocked back numerous times, shed tears and tantrums as well as experiencing laughs, smiles, milestones and magical moments on this 21 year journey. Whatever your vision, goals or desires you have for your children and their future - keep striving, keep going. You'll have mountains to climb and dark days to face – but keep going and never give up because the destination is so worth the at times arduous journey – this I can promise you!

So if you happen to be passing through Alexandra on a Thursday between 1.30 and 3.30pm, call in, say hi and check out the training cafe at Living Options centre. You'll be warmed by the smiles on the faces and the best damn coffee and cake in town, I'll stake my reputation in it.