

## **A Mile in My Shoes: Jason Bodle with Ben Aldridge (Part 2)**

Jason: Hello listener, this is RTRFM 92 .1, the station breaking barriers throughout the community. I'm your host, Jason Bodle, and welcome to A Mile in My Shoes. This podcast seeks to educate the community by breaking down barriers, misconceptions and stigmas.

With this in mind, I will be talking to people from all walks of life, sharing their stories and experiences. As someone on the autistic spectrum, I will also be offering my own opinions and perspectives on the trials and tribulations that neurodivergent people face.

Thank you for tuning in to Episode 2 of Ben Aldridge of 30 Foot Drop. Ben has been many things in his life, a soldier, troublemaker, explorer and poor decision maker. Currently he is a husband, a father, a business owner, quadriplegic and a person living with mental illness.

Founder and managing director of 30 Foot Drop, he is a dedicated systemic advocate, innovator and educator in the disability space. Thank you for joining us today again, Ben.

Ben: Look, it's my absolute pleasure, Jason.

Jason: Last time we covered how you became a quadriplegic, and we also covered the stereotypes and misconceptions around that. Following that, in what ways has your view on life changed since the accident?

Ben: Before my accident, I very much subscribed to this idea that disability was almost something worse than death. To be disabled is to be tortured, is to be stuck, is to be a prisoner within your own body. And that is so not true. For me, that mindset, that view on life of suddenly I am one of these people with disability, and you know what? Life is pretty awesome. Life is as good as you choose to make it. Life is for the living. And for me, that sort of big mind shift, that realisation, that light bulb moment is what's really led to a lot of what I do around advocacy and innovation.

It's actually trying to get society to realise that disability is just another phase of life. It's another part of life. It's not better than it's not less than it just is.

Jason: It's a really inspirational mindset and I think a really amazing quote as well. Ben, what term or phrase do you prefer to describe yourself as?

Ben: I identify as a disabled person and I describe myself as disabled, even though it's not the politically correct term that the government likes to use, because I subscribe to the social model of disability.

And that is whereby I am more disabled by my environment and the choices of its designers than I am by my own body. If you get rid of stairs, if you get rid of these other bits and pieces of the built environment that actually create barriers, then I am as able as anybody else to do anything.

Jason: So Ben, I've got to ask. What are the most common misconceptions about being a quadriplegic that you would like to clear up?

Ben: So when people think of the term quadriplegic, they might immediately think somebody who can't move anything except their head, somebody who can't move their arms or legs.

And this is because of, you know, our history of spinal cord injury, the most famous person, Christopher Reaves, Superman, who did absolutely amazing things around raising awareness and actually developing sort of modern ideas around rehabilitation than what we can do.

Now Christopher Reaves was quite a high level quadriplegic. He couldn't actually breathe for himself. So he was on a ventilator. The thing is a quadriplegic is actually somebody who has impaired mobility in all four limbs as a result of his spinal cord injury.

Now impaired mobility means that some your muscles don't function. So you've got some people out there who are technically quadriplegics who can actually still stand up and walk short distances or move themselves from their chair to their bed.

So people look at me and often think that I'm a paraplegic because I can move my arms and I get around in a manual wheelchair. But the reality is that I've only got control of three of my muscle groups.

I've got control of my shoulders, my biceps and my forearms. That's it. I've got no triceps. I've got no pecs, no back muscles, etc. So you know, I have very little control. I just managed to do a lot because I've been very stubborn throughout my rehabilitation and very determined to get the most out of my body that I can.

And I suppose it goes into sort of the view on disability in general, where disability is so diverse. It is such a large, you know, large amount of people with diverse disabilities that no two disabilities will come across as the same.

I know people who have exactly the same diagnosis around spinal cord injury as I do, yet what they're able to do and what they can feel is completely different. And so I really encourage people to overlook assumptions.

Even if you know somebody who has the same disability as somebody that you're just meeting, don't assume that their needs and their abilities are going to be exactly the same. They're an individual. Everybody's different.

Jason: That's really interesting to me because I have to plead ignorance myself. I was under the impression that quadriplegic meant unable to move anywhere from the neck down. So I've just learned something with that. That's really interesting.

Ben: Hey, we learn something new every day.

Jason: We do. So Ben, since your accident, you founded your business, 30 Foot Drop. Would you like to tell us a little bit more about that?

Ben: Sure. So 30 Foot Drop is built around three pillars. Those three pillars are advocacy, innovation and education. The inspiration for 30 Foot Drop came from my own experiences, my own insights around disability and looking at the reality of disability.

You know, we covered earlier sort of that change of mindset that I had. And I want other people within the community to come to this same understanding without having to acquire their own disability.

So that's where 30 Foot Drop comes in. And we started looking at the education that was already being done because had the education

already been doing right, I wouldn't have had this moment of insight, this change of mindset.

And so a lot of what we do is actually looking at how things are being done at the moment and how we can improve the power of the innovator. How can we actually make them more effective going forward?

And I love it. I love what I do as a job. It's so much fun.

Jason: You also do public speaking. What more can you tell us about that? Is that part of what you do with 30 Foot Drop?

Ben: It is. So we do do a whole lot of different things. It's a very multidisciplinary team that we've got. So, yes, the professional speaking is definitely one part of it. I find that storytelling is such an important tool in changing the conceptions of society. Through storytelling, we can take intangible concepts around disability and actually make them real, make people understand the actual real-life effects of policy decisions through storytelling. We also work with businesses as well to help innovate new ways of using their system to better suit the disability community and get better results.

So not only are we making life better for the disability community, but we're also helping businesses grow. We're making them realise and helping them tap into markets that they've never even thought of before.

You know, accessible tourism, for example, is a big one that we're currently working on. You know, there's a lot of people with disability out there who are currently not travelling because it's just too hard, but we have money to spend.

So if we can help the tourism in the next few years, industry understand this and understand what it is that we need in order to travel easier, then it will actually strengthen the local economy in these tourism areas by bringing more people through.

Jason: Gotcha. That's fantastic because so many people wouldn't even consider that, you know, they wouldn't understand the implications and the challenges that people with disabilities would have to go through for

something like a holiday or a visit. So it's really important to kind of bring that education about to the public.

Ben: Yeah, that's right. And doing it in a way because we live in a capitalistic society. So much education around disability to date has been based around the concept of moral obligation.

You know, that is we do these things for the disability community because it's the right thing to do. And it is a moral obligation is quite a powerful force in itself, but we live in a capitalistic society.

And if businesses cannot remain competitive. whilst trying to do the right thing, then it often gets put down a low priority. But if we can make it so that it becomes an economic imperative, that in order to remain competitive, businesses do these things, then we can create change and we can actually really embed these things and make it a norm within businesses.

So the businesses are inclusive because they know that if they're not, then their competition has got a leg up and that they're not gonna remain competitive.

Jason: Well, look, thanks for joining us a second time today Ben.

Ben: Jason, look, it's been an absolute pleasure being on the podcast with you. And thank you for having me on.

Jason: Oh, well, look, thanks so much. Listener, make sure to check out Ben's company on all of its social medias. Thank you for tuning in to episode two of A Mile In My Shoes. And we'll see you next time. Goodbye.