

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.

Today, we have Ben Aldridge of 30 Foot Drop. He has been many things in his life, a soldier, troublemaker, explorer and poor decision maker. Currently, he is a husband, father and 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, Ben.

Ben: My absolute pleasure, Jason.

Jason: Ben, would you like to share with us today your story on how you became a quadriplegic?

Ben: Oh, yeah, sure. So I became a quadriplegic as a result of an accident, but there's more to it than that. Mine was what I like to call an alcohol-fueled gravity accident. I was serving in the military and I'd just come back from overseas.

I was in the infantry and I was suffering quite badly from post-traumatic stress upon my return. Whilst I was over there, I had some experiences that really left a scar on my psyche. And in 2006, I was really struggling to deal with it.

Now, I fell victim to a stigma that's very common in our society around the idea that in order to be respected, you need to be strong, independent, deal with your own stuff. To seek help is weak. Now, here I am suffering a mental illness that I have have no idea about.

And in order to help deal with this, I turned to alcohol as a tempering bandaid. And the thing about alcohol and other drugs like that is that, yes, it can wallpaper over the cracks, but it doesn't actually stop the erosion of your foundations.

And you start to take more risk. And one night on the way home from the pub, there is actually a really steep hill that's been cut out to allow a road through. And as a result, you've got this rather large cliff.

It's about 10 meters high. And from the top of it, you've got this beautiful view out over town. So it's great. And with a full bladder, you can hit the cars down below when you need to relieve yourself.

And pissing on the world felt great. It really did. This was a regular thing that I would do on the way home. And one night, it went wrong. I lost my balance midstream and fell 10 meters or 30 foot. Somehow the only thing I broke was my neck.

Jason: Hence the 30 foot drop.

Ben: Yes, that's right. Hence the name of my business. But the fact that I'm alive, that I don't have other issues associated with this accident apart from quadriplegia is freaking amazing. So that's how I became quadriplegic.

Jason: So Ben, I've got to ask, while you were at the bottom of the cliff, how were you found?

Ben: I was found by a taxi driver. He'd seen me lying there and this third time on his way past, he actually had a fare in his taxi at the time, the customer there, and just said, look, I just need to check this guy out. He's been there for a while now. I just want to make sure he's okay. I don't know how long I've been there. My memories of the time of my accident quite hazy. All that I know is that from the ambulance reports, I was found at the bottom of this cliff with my fly undone, my privates hanging out, and urine all over me.

Jason: Oh no.

Ben: Yeah, look, not the first time that I'd woken up in that state, but the first time waking up as a quadriplegic in that state, yes.

Jason: Ben, that's obviously such a terrific shock to go through. So how did you find the strength to move forward?

Ben: Yeah, that's a really good question. It wasn't easy, and it took a long time. It was sort of building up my resilience and coming to that realization over the course of, oh, what have taken me a good five or six years to really come to that sort of conclusion,?

Jason: Really?

Ben: Yeah, yeah, it took a long time.

Jason: Wow.

Ben: And yeah, for me, it was the support of family, of my wife, who I met after my accident, of my friends mixed in with a bit of the military training.

in order to get the most out of yourself, yeah, you need to push yourself. It wasn't until five years after my accident, I actually started to take full control of every aspect of my disabilities, which was my mental health, my mental illness.

It wasn't until my son was born and I actually asked myself the question, what sort of father do I want to be?

Jason: So Ben, what were the most unexpected life changes you went through following the accident?

Ben: So when I look at my life before my accident and after my accident, the biggest life change that I've gone through is actually breaking down that stigma of independence, you know, whereby you have to deal with your own things and to ask for help is weak.

I've actually learned that asking for help isn't a weakness. It's a strength. It doesn't matter whether you have a disability or not. We all have our own strengths and weaknesses. There are things that we are good at and things that we're not.

Jason: Oh, yeah, look, it's just unrealistic to expect everyone to be able to do everything on their own all the time. So there really is no shame in asking for assistance. So to kind of build on that, in what ways can society be more accommodating for people and wheelchairs?

Ben: Well, stairs are my greatest nemesis as a wheelchair user. I always like to joke that I can go downstairs fine. I may not be upright by the end of it, but I can go down them. For me, the biggest barrier that I face around disability is the assumptions.

People assume that because you're a wheelchair user that you must be less capable than other people to do anything. So for me, the best way that society can be more accommodating is to check your assumptions, to look at them and go, well, I just saw this person in the wheelchair going down the street and my first thought was, oh, poor him.

Why do you have that assumption? If it's me that you've seen going down the street, I've actually got a pretty damn good life. I live nice and close to the beach. I've got a loving wife and kid. I travel a lot for work.

I get out camping. I do so many things that lead to me having this amazing life. And yet people assume that I don't because I'm in a wheelchair. So it's about checking the assumptions.

Jason: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think the first place we should start when coming to change society's attitudes towards disabled people is to remove the stigma around it and remove this idea that if someone has a disability that they automatically have a bad life.

So while on the topic of stigmas and preconceptions about people with a disability, I've got to ask what's the most ignorant thing about a disability?

Ben: Yeah, this is always a good question. There are two that spring to mind. The first one is when people pack me on the head like a dog. That always goes down an absolute treat. It makes me feel great about myself. Pack me on the head and call me a champ.

I'm like, wow, okay, mate. You see, I'm 6 '4", and I always look at people. I'm like, would you do that to me if I wasn't in a wheelchair? Probably not. And so, you know, that's the first one and the other one is when you hear people say, oh, if I had a disability like you, then I'd probably kill myself.

Oh, that makes me feel great.

Jason: That's such a horrible thing to hear.

Ben: It is. But it comes back to that stigma again. Like, we'll talk about this idea that... to have a disability is to be less than, is to be inferior, is to be trapped, is to be tortured. It's not. Disability is life.

Jason: I've spoken to people before where upon finding out that I'm on the spectrum they adapt the same kind of tone they would to speak to a child.

Ben: Oh yeah. Oh yeah that tone.

Jason: Yeah look I'm not great with tone but that's one of the few tones I can pick up because it's just such an obvious difference to how people would normally speak.

Jason: But it's these common experiences that make for great storytelling. Talking about the condescending tones and getting people to imagine how could it make them feel to be spoken to like that.

Jason: It's demeaning but I guess it's in part what's driven me to make this podcast is to kind of tear down those misconceptions. Following that what advice would you give to someone who is new to life in a wheelchair?

Ben: My main advice would be to remind people that humans are resilient and adaptable and that you're no different. Speaking from my own personal experience as a full-time wheelchair user when you first try to use a wheelchair full-time it's hard. It really is. But after a while it becomes like riding a bike or walking or anything else.

It just becomes automatic. I remember it was one day probably about six years post-injury that at the end of the day I actually didn't remember

consciously moving my arms all day. I'd covered about 15 kms that day for work and I just did it.

It was just unconscious thought and that's what I mean by resilient and adaptable. We learn it takes time. Your arms will not be used to it. It will hurt some days but you can adapt and you'll get used to it.

When you do the downhills become so much fun.

Jason: I love that. And I've got to say as well, I really admire the humour and the positive mindset you have about it all. I think that's really inspirational.

Ben: Oh, look, at the end of the day, life is meant for living and the best way to live is to have fun with it. So between that and the coping mechanism of black humour, it works all pretty well.

Jason: Well look Ben, thank you so much for coming to the podcast today. I'm really blown away by everything you've had to say. I really appreciate it. So listener, check out Ben's company, 30 Foot Drop on all its social medias and its website. And thank you for tuning in to the first ever episode of A Mile in My Shoes.