

**Intro:** Choice and Control, a podcast celebrating people with disability. In this season we're talking about access, inclusion, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme. This podcast series is brought to you by Carers Queensland, NDIS Local Area Coordination Partner in the Community.

**00:00:23 Jodie van de Wetering:** G'day, I'm Jodie van de Wetering. Today, I'm talking to Amanda Fraser, an athlete whose career included the Sydney 2000 Paralympics. Outside the pool and the field, her employment experiences have been a mixed bag. But now she's found the career she loves working with other people with disability. As we sit down to chat, she's a Local Area Coordinator with Carers Queensland's team in Rockhampton.

**00:47 Amanda Fraser:** I grew up in Emerald. About 18 months after I was born I was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. I've got two younger sisters, who were my protectors, I call them my protectors. And, basically just grew up in a really sporting family, really. I was in a hugely basketball orientated community and when I got to the age of 12 or 13, I was told, 'hey, you can't play basketball anymore because you can't dribble with both hands'. So that was quite devastating for me, being told that I couldn't do something that my family had always done. And then my parents quickly tried to have a look around at other sports. And they found swimming, mainly because

there was no coach that was willing to coach me in athletics. So when I did the swimming, I started off and someone said, 'Oh there's this thing called the Paralympics?' And I was like, 'Oh, well, okay, that's what I want to do.' I watched the Olympics every four years and had athletes plastered on my walls and that's what I wanted to do.

And so my education probably lacked, in those areas, I wasn't focused on my education as much because I was probably told that I wasn't smart enough. I think when I got to grade 10, because I was absent for swimming so often travelling overseas and seeing the world and competing, they basically wanted to put me into a special needs unit. So my mum quickly decided no, that's not going to happen. And we moved to Rockhampton from there and continued on the sporting journey. Ended up passing most of my grades - most, not all.

I think for me going to the Paralympics in Sydney, that was 20 years ago next weekend, which is scary, was just this real awakening of, 'Hey, you can do this, you can really be successful and you can achieve things'. And Sydney 2000 I think was my awakening and built my confidence. My mum stood in the grandstands and saw me in this skimpy little cozy or swimmers, waving my hands, telling people to cheer me on and, how it was that shy little 18 year old doing that? So, yeah, for me, that was the awakening.

And then I moved to Canberra in 2001 after being kind of pigeonholed into a childcare/teacher aide position through the employment agencies. They got me that job.

**03:49 Jodie:** Was that where your passions were? Did you go in thinking, 'Oh, I would like to work with children?'

**03:53 Amanda:** No, definitely not. No. I mean, I love children, but I think I probably didn't know what I wanted to do at that point. So I think it was just, 'well, this would be easy for you, so do this' and the expectations I think were fairly low in the job markets. 'This is what you can do. So let's put you in here and then we'll tick a box.'

**04:19 Jodie:** It sounds like had you not had that amazing outlet through your athletics, life could have been fairly dull.

**04:29 Amanda:** Gray. Yeah, definitely. And I will be forever thankful for that person saying, 'hey, there's this thing called the Paralympics' because without it, my life would be completely different.

**04:41 Jodie:** You ended up in Canberra, you're working in childcare just because that's where you landed. How did your career progress from there? Did you think about getting into something sport-related since that was where your talents were?

**04:53 Amanda:** Not at that point. I went into the swim coach arena, and then I went into admin. I worked at the Australian Institute of

Sport's shop. I worked in the tours department, so I did the tours. I really liked the tours because I got to meet different people and share my story a little bit. And that was fun. And then I got a job with Telstra. So I worked in sales in a licensed shop, which was awesome. And I did that throughout my athletics career because by that time I was trialling throwing shot put and discus.

That was fun and a huge learning curve because being part of the Australian Institute of Sport was just an amazing facility. All the athletes that you got to meet, all that stuff, it was a great experience.

**05:45 Jodie:** And how well was the Australian Institute of Sport tooled up to work with the para athletes?

**05:51 Amanda:** Brilliant. Yeah. I mean, we had the best coaches there and from my point of view, I thought that I learnt athletics from the best. I really did. They were innovative and had imaginations and really just supportive in listening and engaging. So it was great. Yeah. Inclusive. But I think that area was just amazing because you were with the able-bodied athletes. So every day you would walk around, in the beginning I was seeing Michael Klim two or three times a week and you're just like, 'oh my God, that's Michael Klim just over there!' People today probably don't remember who Michael Klim is. He was one of the ones smashing the guitars with the Americans. And Alexander Popov and Patrick Johnson and all those guys were just amazing.

**06:46 Jodie:** And you're just bopping around rubbing shoulders with your heroes, what an inspiring-

06:51 Amanda: Kostya Tszyu! Kostya Tszyzu was like, Oh my God! I remember going into the gym, Kostya Tszyzu really changed my idea of who a boxer really was. Like, he basically said to us, there was a group of probably four or five athletes with disabilities doing gym work. So we were lifting heavy on the bench and throwing weights around and he said, 'oh God, you guys are amazing. Like, you're just out there doing what you do'. And from my point of view, it was really nice to be recognised by someone like him, it was cool.

**07:31 Jodie:** While that level of inclusion and respect was happening in the AIS, what was happening in your outside-of-sport career? Was that same feeling of being included and valued?

**07:43 Amanda:** Definitely not. I always felt in my work career, I mean, I hadn't studied, so that was the issue I think. Throughout my education I didn't feel smart enough, so I didn't want to go back and study, because if you've been told that you can't do something for long enough then you're not going to want to do it. And I didn't, and I stayed away from it for a long time. So I just worked to earn the money.

And then eventually, after I left Canberra and I retired [from professional sport] a couple of years later, someone said to me, 'why don't you do personal training?' And again, that awakening, it was

almost like that second opportunity in the employment field. So, I went through the Certificate III and the Certificate IV in Personal Training and I was the most successful trainer so I got awarded the champion trainer of the course. And that wasn't just the performing the exercises part, that was the assignments and quizzes and all that stuff. To be recognised, not only in the sporting arena but academically, it was amazing. I just have never felt that way before. I can remember getting awarded that award and it was just shocked because I was just like, 'how did this happen?' I didn't think that I was smart. I literally just didn't believe that I was smart enough to be that person. But it just shows that when you're passionate about something, you can really excel. So I think sport and disability is probably where I excel.

**09:25 Jodie:** Working as a personal trainer, did you gravitate towards people with disability, or where did that take you?

**09:31 Amanda:** I tried to, but I worked in the middle of the city in Brisbane and there just wasn't enough people accessing the gym in Brisbane. I guess our lift was probably hidden, so it was really hard to see where the access was, although we were ready and willing to have people with disabilities there. And I did train a couple of my friends and show them how to do squats when they didn't particularly have leg strength. So, that was amazing. It was a great

experience, but they were my friends as well. They couldn't walk afterwards!

**10:10 Jodie:** And were they still your friends after that?

**10:16 Amanda:** Yes they are. I think that within that dynamic I got to meet so many people from so many different walks of life as well. I felt like I was really lucky because I worked in Brisbane city because you're working with doctors, and occupational therapists, and people that work for WorkCover, and lawyers and all that. Amazing, different. And then students as well. So yeah, it was a really dynamic, different stories from different people.

And that's what I love about the LAC role, that you do get to meet different people. And if you can hear their story every day of the week, then that's what I love. I love listening to people's stories and trying to help them.

**11:05 Jodie:** And what was the process then from working in the gym in Brisbane, to up in Rockhampton and working as a Local Area Coordinator?

**11:13 Amanda:** So I moved back to Rockhampton for love. I reconnected with a bloke that I went to high school with. I had said that I would never move for a man. I had just completed the Kokoda challenge in 2017, and we reconnected after that. And I just thought, well, if I don't move now for a man, then I never will.

So I took the opportunity, and having the personal training background I just thought, 'well, I can do this anywhere'. And he's got his family here, he's got a son, his life, great job. So for me, it was easier for me to make the move. And then, probably about four months later, this job came up and a lady that worked here actually said, 'oh, you should apply for this role'. And I did. And the rest is history because I got a foot in the door. I don't know how, but I got a foot in the door.

**12:17 Jodie:** And that must've been quite a leap of faith because this was before the NDIS had started rolling out in Queensland. So we didn't necessarily understand what a Local Area Coordinator was going to be.

**12:29 Amanda:** Yeah. I think I didn't really know what the role was, but I knew I could bring to the role that being able to listen, being able to learn about different disabilities, being able to support people and encourage people.

I have great aspirations and I obviously dream big for everyone. And I think that if you can show people that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, then isn't that what we're all here for.

**12:57 Jodie:** For people who haven't had anything to do with the NDIS before could you explain, as an LAC, what do you do? Where do you sit within the NDIS?



**13:06 Amanda:** Well, probably the most important part is that we have to be seen as impartial. We get to know the participants, so we get to share their story. So we paint the picture for the Agency. So when we paint that picture, we've got to get all of the information out of the participant and their family. So again, trying to figure out what encourages them to be better, or what are they passionate about, so that we can try and figure out where they fit in society so that we can try and make that job happen or, make that social group happen, joining a different group that does art or craft or competing in archery or whatever. I think there's so many avenues in Rockhampton, I think we're very fortunate in Rockhampton to have numerous organisations that are out there to help people with disabilities. We've just got to find the right fit for the right person,

**14:06 Jodie:** It is finding that fit because you don't necessarily know what's out there. And on the other hand, if you are running a sporting club or a hobbyist group of some sort, you may have people who want to join and you don't realise how you're not accessible because you've never thought about it.

**14:22 Amanda:** And that's a scary thought. And I think that it's just about asking the people with disabilities, 'how can we help you to be included?' So it's not about saying no straight away it's, well, how can we make that introduction? How can we look at what we do?

You know, riding a horse, do we bring a ladder over, I don't know, to get someone up onto a horse? So it's about finding the ways.

I often say that people with disabilities are really good at cheating because we like to cover your disabilities up. So they're the people that have the answers. And if they don't have the answers, then someone that is trained like an occupational therapist would be able to figure that out for us.

**15:05 Jodie:** Something that's come up over and over again in this season of the podcast is the importance of the attitude. You can have the ramp, you can have the lift, but you also need the attitude of 'everyone's welcome here'. And it's our job to make it work, not to find a reason to not make it work.

**15:20 Amanda:** Yeah, absolutely. I think that you've just got to be open to it. And I mean, I see that everyday going to the gym, I go to the gym and I feel included every day and I can't do majority of the exercises that everyone else can do. But to be able to have a regression or a modification so that I can still do five rounds of the same workout then, so be it.

**23:04 Outro:** Thanks for joining us at Choice and Control, a Carers Queensland podcast. For more information about Carers Queensland, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, or the Local Area Coordination Program, please contact us online at [www.carersqld.com.au](http://www.carersqld.com.au).

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This podcast is a place for people with disability to share experiences, stories, and achievements. If you have a story you think we should know about, please contact us through the Carers Queensland inquiries line on 1300 999 636, or email [cq.enquiries@ndis.gov.au](mailto:cq.enquiries@ndis.gov.au).

Until next time, thanks for listening.