

Triumph over Adversity:

The struggle to achieve to educational opportunities for children with cerebral palsy

An account of the efforts of Joseph Michell and other parents of children with cerebral palsy in mid-twentieth century Western Australia

By Niamh Dell,

Year 10,

Mercedes College

Children with significant disabilities had very limited access to education in Western Australia until the mid-twentieth century. The situation was particularly grim for those with cerebral palsy, which was largely misunderstood until this time. Because muscle control is crucial in speech, there are frequently problems in speech clarity for people with cerebral palsy. Because of this communication problem, up to the twentieth century, many people, including most doctors and educationalists, classified many children with this physical disability as 'imbeciles', that is, persons with a limited intellectual ability. Cerebral palsy is: "An abnormality of motor function ... that is acquired at an early age ... due to a brain lesion that is non-progressive."¹ Most experts describe four main types of cerebral palsy.² 'Spastic' cerebral palsy affects over 70% of people with cerebral palsy, leading to many services and facilities using the word 'spastic' in their names until recent years when public perceptions of the term led to changes.³

The first moves towards providing facilities for children with cerebral palsy in WA were by charitable foundations. In this era, it appears that the provision of amenities to assist disabled children to develop their potential were perceived as being gifts from generous, able-bodied people rather every child's right, and the responsibility of governments. Although Federal and State governments are now major participants in providing facilities, the families and friends of people with cerebral palsy still bear over 40% of the costs associated with allowing individuals to lead as full a life as possible.⁴

On June 11, 1934, the Perth Rotary Club, inspired by groups overseas, formed a special committee to coordinate fundraising for 'crippled children'. They intended using a planned exhibition of 'Titania's Palace' as a major fundraising attraction.⁵ The exhibition raised a total of £1,520. This was insufficient to purchase property for 'crippled children' so participants discussed forming a 'Crippled Children's Society'. On 8 August 1937, the Society (WASCC) was formed.⁶ Some disagreements occurred about the use of the Titania's Palace

¹ www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey+11114

² The most common types of CP - **Spasticity**: which means stiffness or tightness of muscles. **Athetoid Cerebral Palsy**: Athetoid or athetosis is the term used for uncontrolled movements, often leading to erratic movements. **Ataxic Cerebral Palsy**: The least common type of cerebral palsy. Ataxic (or ataxia) is a term used to describe a lack of balance and coordination, often including unsteady, shaky movements. **Mixed Type Cerebral Palsy**: when more than one type of motor pattern is present and no one pattern is predominating. From- www.scopevic.org.au/info_about_cp.html See **Appendix 1** for more information.

³ 'Spastic' is still in use in some states but is not used in WA because of the way in which the term 'spastic' is used as an insult by some people intending to imply the target is extremely incompetent or unintelligent. (See **Appendix 2**)

⁴ Access Economics Pty Ltd report entitled "***The Economic Impact of Cerebral Palsy in Australia in 2007***" pg viii www.yooralla.com.au/pdf/CP_EcoImpactApr08.pdf

⁵ 'Titania's Palace' was a large, elaborate 'edifice' created by British peer Sir Neville Wilkinson as a home for the fairies of his small daughter's imagination. The display included 4,000 pieces of miniature furniture and botanical specimens realistically moulded in brass. The Perth exhibition of Titania's Palace was opened by Lieutenant-Governor Sir James Mitchell on 4 April 1935, and attended by a crowd of 21,089 people. Described in Evans, Beth, (no publication details but received and catalogued WA Library Board, August 19, 2003) ***Rocky Bay: A Short History***. Pg 23-24

⁶ After developing a constitution, the group became The Western Australian Society for Crippled Children.

funds and other donations, exacerbated by the delays in achieving substantial goals such as the purchase of property to be used as a 'Children's Home', so in the intervening period some funds given to the Children's Hospital. World War II delayed progress so it was not until November 1945 that the Society renewed its work. At that stage, there were 185 children registered with the Society and £2,554 in its bank account.⁷ In 1947, they established a 'play centre' in the McGibbon Pavilion at the Royal King's Park Tennis Club. The centre opened each weekday and "was staffed by Red Cross and other volunteers".⁸

The centre was not designed to provide for all the educational needs of the participating children but organisers saw it as providing: "congenial pursuits and a modicum of education (and) some badly needed social training."⁹ Some children with cerebral palsy attended the centre, including Warwick Michell whose father, Joseph, became a significant advocate for the provision of services for people with cerebral palsy in WA.¹⁰

Joseph Michell described the frustrations of being a parent of a 'spastic' child in this era of limited medical and public understanding of the condition: "I was told that prior to 1940 parents of CP children in Western Australia and in most parts of the world ... were unable to find out what was wrong with their child ... Invariably, they were told that nothing could be done to alleviate the condition and were recommended to place the child in an institution (mental), forget about it, and have another child in its place."¹¹ Sadly, similar advice was still given to WA parents in the 1960s when Mr John Lawson was told to place his infant daughter in Claremont Asylum and 'forget about her'.¹² In 1953, Dr Peter Singleton's parents were discouraged from seeking education and therapy for him, which a specialist described as a "waste of time and money for a child of his mentality."¹³

Joseph Michell and other parents wanted a specifically designed program to meet the needs of the children with cerebral palsy. They were unhappy with the management of the WASCC in this matter, despite Michell successfully seeking election as a member of the WASCC Council in the hopes of improving the situation of CP children. Michell faced many disappointments in his effort to convince others on the Council to be proactive in meeting the needs of 'spastic' children. The parents were also frustrated at delays in employing a

⁷ Evans op cit Pg 25-26

⁸ Evans op cit Pg 26. This was a similar situation to that of Bunbury Centre for Spastic and Physically Handicapped Children, which opened in May 1949. Evans reports that: "The helpers lacked professional training but managed to work successfully from a syllabus supplied by the WASCC." Pg 27

⁹ Evans op cit pg 26

¹⁰ See Appendix 3, "The Michell Family Story" from Lake, Brenda & Turner, Carol, compilers (2001)) *Early Recollections: Golden Jubilee 1951-2001* (Cerebral Palsy Association of Western Australia) Pg 3

¹¹ Michell, Swee Lin (2005) quoting an extract from "Little's Disease" by J. T. Michell, (1970) *Pulling up that Blind: Perseverance and Dedication – A Biography of Joseph Michell* (Optima Press) Pgs 36-37. 'Little's Disease' was the earlier name for cerebral palsy.

¹² Telephone interview with Mr Lawson in June, 2009 about his experiences as a parent of a child with cerebral palsy in the 1950's and 60's

¹³ Singleton, Dr Peter (2007) in *The Power of Listening: Celebrating Successful Stories of People with Cerebral Palsy* Pg 28 www.tccp.com.au/pdf/power_040208.pdf (See Appendix 4 for more of Dr Singleton's story.)

physiotherapist, who could provide important services to their children. Although cerebral palsy cannot be 'cured', research was emerging that indicated that the motor skills and quality of life of children and adults with cerebral palsy could be improved by physiotherapy, along with occupational therapy (aimed at enhancing independent living skills) and speech therapy. In addition, the parents of children with cerebral palsy were eager to establish a school for their children who were unable to gain entry to 'mainstream' schools despite having sufficient intellectual capacity and willingness to learn. It irked the parents that the WASCC had held a number of public appeals on behalf of 'spastic' children but had not used any of the money raised for the specific needs of these children. Michell hired a hall and chaired a meeting on October 20th, 1946, during which he and a small group of parents formed the "Spastic Parents' Group" (SPG).¹⁴

Definite plans for a school and clinic specifically designed for 'spastic' children began when the parents decided to send a deputation to the Premier seeking the Government's stance on establishing appropriate facilities for their children. In June 1947, they approached the WASCC asking them to participate in a joint deputation. WASCC officials stated that the Government was aware of the problem but suggested that the Secretary of the WASCC, Miss Jean Lang, prepare a resume of WASCC activities for the Minister for Health, with an appropriate covering letter. Later WASCC sent the Government a copy of their annual report to illustrate the cost of the activities they undertook.

No action followed and, although the WASCC Council said it would organize a deputation, this decision was reversed on November 20, 1947. Further controversy developed when the SPG were requested to meet with the WASCC on January 28th, 1948. The SPG held an earlier meeting to prepare for this session, suggesting the parents distrusted the larger organisation. At the meeting with the Secretary of the WASCC, the parents conveyed the decisions of the earlier meeting to Miss Lang and the groups unanimously decided to work independently.¹⁵

The SPG approached Mr Hugh Leslie, MLA, on the recommendation of one of the parents in the group who knew him. Impressed by their presentation, Leslie agreed to introduce the delegation, and helped plan the meeting. The parents met with the Acting Premier, Mr Arthur Watts, on May 12th, 1948. In a fortunate coincidence, Watts was the Minister for Education so was empowered to ensure that his sympathetic response to the children's needs would result in action on their educational requirements. The Health Department showed less enthusiasm for providing any specialist treatment for the children. Watts informed Michell that the Education Department would act on the plan to provide for the children, despite the lack of cooperation from the Health Department.

¹⁴ Michell, Swee Lin (2005) op cit Pg 40

¹⁵ Michell, Swee Lin (2005) op cit Pg 50

Unexpectedly, the WASCC attempted to influence the Government to pressure the SPG to remain a subordinate group and seeking that the Government would deal only with the larger Council. Hugh Leslie refused to support this request.¹⁶ Like many others Michell alerted to the difficulties facing those with cerebral palsy, Leslie was to remain an advocate for better conditions for this group for decades to come.

After investigation of circumstances in New South Wales, where a 'Spastic Centre' had been established in 1945, Mr Watts, as Minister for Education, officially advised the SPG that the Government would establish a Special School for 'spastics', in an annexe established at Thomas Street State School. This decision took some months to implement and the school, named after the Governor Sir James Mitchell, opened for the first term of 1950. The staff consisted of three teachers and three assistants with an enrolment of thirty-three children.¹⁷ The centre had provision for up to forty-eight pupils.

The children were transported each day by Government school buses. Mr Watts noted that this was a precedent in the metropolitan area, although school buses had been operating in rural districts for some years. This was an important benefit as many families in this era lacked private vehicles and did not have the means to pay for daily taxis. The buses allowed students from around the metropolitan area to have access to the school. Attendance at the school had many positive effects on the students. Despite the initial lack of any therapeutic services: "the improvement in them was most noticeable to their parents. The children were now motivated and they had something to do to occupy their minds."¹⁸

In order to address wider, ongoing challenges, Joseph Michell encouraged the parents to disband the SPA and form the Spastic Welfare Association (SWA) on October 18th, 1950.¹⁹ Michell persuaded Hugh Leslie to take on the role as President of the new association, a position he held for over two decades. Other members included Senator Donald Willesee, who agreed to participate because of his respect for both Leslie and Michell.²⁰ They had more extensive aims than the children's education but the school was still a major focus for the Association.

Dr Eleanor Schonell, a UWA graduate prior to completing a Ph.D at the University of Birmingham, presented an influential lecture in Perth in 1950. Her research into intelligence testing of disabled children showed that many with cerebral palsy had been wrongly assessed as having low intelligence. Because of their communication problems and difficulties with manipulating objects, many 'spastic' children scored poorly on conventional

¹⁶ Michell, Swee Lin (2005) op cit Pg 62

¹⁷ Blomfield, Pam (1970) ***The History of Sir James Mitchell Spastic Centre, Mt Lawley.*** (Typed thesis for Graylands Teachers College) Pg 4

¹⁸ Michell, Swee Lin (2005) op cit Pg 64

¹⁹ Lake, Brenda & Turner, Carol, compilers (2001) Pg 1; the group then changed its name to the 'Cerebral Palsy Association of WA' in 1992 and 'The Centre for Cerebral Palsy' in 2007.

²⁰ Michell, Swee Lin (2005) op cit Pg 76

IQ tests. Dr Schonell's research established that approximately 75% of children with cerebral palsy were of average or above average intelligence.²¹

October 1951 brought an unexpected problem for the SWA. They had commenced fundraising for a 'Spastic Centre' when the WASSCC announced its intention to change its name to "The West Australian Society for Spastic and Crippled Children". Despite a protest to the Attorney General, the Registrar of Companies supported the legality of the change. After a year of negotiations, the WASSCC made a statement to *The West Australian* saying it had decided to drop "Spastic and" from its name, conceding that the SWA would "shortly be in a position to care for all spastics, whether adults or children"²² so the WASSCC would dedicate its own work to other 'physically handicapped children'.

In 1952, the school moved to a Mount Lawley property modified to house treatment and training facilities.²³ The centre was only intended for treatment but "the Education Department insisted that provision for the school also be included ... This meant that some planned therapy rooms had to be given over to education, with overcrowding the immediate result."²⁴ (By 1982, all treatment and training services were moved to a purpose-built facility at Coolbinia named after former premier, Sir David Brand.²⁵)

The physical disabilities of the students presented significant challenges for their teachers. Initially, the school provided a basic education with many students' progress hampered by their physical restrictions, such as difficulties with using pens to write. Anne Plenderleith, who was nine in 1961, described various methods used to assist her to communicate her ideas with the attempts culminating in her 'last hope': "Miss Lloyd sat me in front of a big, old electric typewriter and strapped a headpiece on my head. Typing seemed as natural to me as a duck taking to water... When I started typing, my neck muscles were weak, but I built them up by typing."²⁶ The majority of students were working on primary school programs and social training. Speech, occupational and physiotherapy were also available to improve students' communication and life skills and physical well-being. By 1970, the school

²¹ ***Australian Dictionary of Biography*** online edition <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogr/a16073b.htm> This is supported by Pam Blomfield's observations at Sir James Mitchell School. She states that among the 143 students at the school in 1970, there was an IQ range of 35 to 150 (ie from only capable of basic literacy at best to the highest range of intellect found in less than 0.1% of the population.)

²² Michell, Swee Lin (2005) op cit Pg 83

²³ Lake, Brenda & Turner, Carol, compilers (2001) op cit Pg 6

²⁴ Lake, Brenda & Turner, Carol, compilers (2001) op cit Pg 27

²⁵ Lake, Brenda & Turner, Carol, compilers (2001) op cit Pg 10

²⁶ Lake, Brenda & Turner, Carol, compilers (2001) op cit Pg 29 quoting from Anne Plenderleith, "My Years at the Sir James Mitchell Centre 1956-1974

had “two high school groups ... working towards an Achievement Certificate. In 1969, two boys from the school matriculated.”²⁷

The improvements in technology enabled students to participate in public examinations, and gain qualifications for entrance to post-school opportunities. Dr Peter Singleton, one of the boys who matriculated in 1969, explained that access to an IBM electric typewriter allowed him to transfer to the ‘senior class’ and prepare for his Junior Certificate examinations in 1967. When he and Victor Chua sat the Matriculation examinations in 1969, they were “accorded half an hour’s extra time to make up for (their) slow speed using the typewriters.”²⁸ Passing every subject, both boys gained entry to UWA but most courses were not available to Singleton because he was confined to a wheelchair. He went on to earn a Ph.D in history while studying in the Arts Faculty where he had access to rooms and the Faculty was willing, after prompting, to make some modifications to buildings to accommodate him.

The Disability Services Act (1986) and the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) made a significant difference to the situation of disabled people throughout Australia. The Acts ensured that all disabled people have fair access to important services, including education. Education Departments, like all other groups, were required to develop policies that guaranteed services would cater to the needs of the disabled, overcoming some of the difficulties in achieving their potential in earlier models of education. Strategies were developed to “offer a basis for supporting our education system in providing quality learning environments for all our students.”²⁹

The vast majority of students with cerebral palsy, like those with other disabilities, are now in ‘mainstream’ education at either government and private schools however approximately 9% of all children with a disability remain in the special schools. “The decision about where a child should go to school depends on the child’s needs, not their diagnosis.”³⁰ The Sir David Brand School now enrolls students with a range of disabilities while The Centre for Cerebral Palsy has services for all children and adults through the various stages of their lives, including those in school. Students with cerebral palsy also have access to some government or system-provided aids, such as modified computers. Funding from government programs also provides additional assistance in the classroom, such as

²⁷ Blomfield, Pam (1970) op cit Pgs 9-10. A statement on Pg 28 in Lake and Turner says that “When Mr Weiland became Headmaster in 1969 he established High School classes there (Mt Lawley) for older children.” However, as Dr Singleton recalls transferring to a senior class and completing Yr 10, in 1967, and Matriculating in 1969, there must have been secondary classes earlier than Mr Weiland’s arrival so the date in Lake and Turner is likely to be the inaccurate on this matter.

²⁸ Singleton, Dr Peter (2007) op cit Pg 29

²⁹ Department of Education and Training, Western Australia (2009) Introduction to ***Pathways to the Future: A Report of the Review of Educational Service for Students with Disabilities in Government Schools.*** <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/disrev/index.htm>

³⁰ Blackmore, Marie, Research Coordinator with The Centre for Cerebral Palsy, in email correspondence (2009)

teachers' aides. In 2008, eighteen students graduated from high school with five progressing to TAFE, one directly to university and one entering a university bridging course.

Continuing technological advances enable CP students to complete academic work and improve their mobility but the high cost of many of these aids means that The Centre for Cerebral Palsy still fundraises for these items for many children and adults. Over the years, it has sought corporate sponsorship; run large-scale events, such as the Wheelie Big Rock Challenge, and appealed to private donors.³¹ The evolving organisation that began as the 'Spastic Parents' Group' continues to be crucial to the task of challenging our community to perceive and develop the potential of people with cerebral palsy.



This essay is dedicated to my uncle, Tony Lee, a former student at the Sir James Mitchell School and currently an employee of Goodwill Industries, run by The Centre for Cerebral Palsy.

³¹ Urgent needs are sometimes mentioned in the "***Brand News***", the Centre's newsletter, http://www.tccp.com.au/News_and_Events~Newsletters and stories about recipients of new equipment encourage readers to see the impact such a gift has had. (See Appendix 5.)

Bibliography and acknowledgements:

Access Economics Pty Ltd report entitled "**The Economic Impact of Cerebral Palsy in Australia in 2007**" www.yooralla.com.au/pdf/CPEcoImpactApr08.pdf An informative study of the real cost of disability to individuals and their families that reveals that, despite government assistance, many families and individuals have very high expenses if they are to provide the best equipment and facilities to meet the needs of a disabled person.

Australian Dictionary of Biography: online edition

<http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogr/a16073b.htm> Contains basic and interesting information about many famous Australians including Dr Eleanor Schonell and her scientist husband, Fred, who worked in similar areas of research.

Blomfield, Pam (1970) **The History of Sir James Mitchell Spastic Centre, Mt Lawley.** (Typed thesis for Graylands Teachers College) An interesting account of the education provided at Sir James Mitchell School nearly 40 years ago. Some of the terms used indicate a shift in attitudes and the description of the equipment and facilities show that technological advances over the years have been invaluable to students with disabilities and their teachers.

Department of Education and Training, Western Australia (2009) Introduction to **Pathways to the Future: A Report of the Review of Educational Service for Students with Disabilities in Government Schools.** <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/disrev/index.htm> The guidelines the Department has developed to ensure that schools act in the best interests of the students who have disabilities. These were developed in response to Federal legislation and have provided schools with criteria for the development of school-based policies.

Evans, Beth, (no publication details but received and catalogued WA Library Board, August 19, 2003) **Rocky Bay: A Short History.** This book provides a clear, basic outline of the initial moves to provide services for disabled children in WA, including some descriptions of the initial fundraising. It makes brief mention of the movement of children with cerebral palsy to an different facility in 1950 but makes no reference to the disputes at this time.

Knowles, John, Chief Executive Officer, Cerebral Palsy Association of Western Australia. **Media Release** re John Worsfold's use of the word 'spastic' as an insult to journalists. *The Media Release explains why this type of use of the term is offensive to those with cerebral palsy. My uncle Tony was very distressed when discussing this incident and began to cry when he told us about it.*

Lake, Brenda & Turner, Carol, compilers (2001)) **Early Recollections: Golden Jubilee 1951-2001** (Cerebral Palsy Association of Western Australia) A very interesting collection of memories of the early days of the services for people with cerebral palsy. The school day memories of some of the people, including Ms Plenderleith and Dr Singleton provide very personal insights into the daily functioning of Sir James Mitchell School and Sir David Brand School.

Medicine.net.com www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey+11114 This is a dictionary of medical information which some clear and basic information about cerebral palsy

Michell, Swee Lin (2005) **Pulling up that Blind: Perseverance and Dedication – A Biography of Joseph Michell** (Optima Press) This is a very personal account of the struggle to establish services for those with cerebral palsy. Mr Michell and other parents faced many setbacks and made great personal sacrifices to ensure that their children, and those who followed them, would be provided with adequate facilities to assist them to develop to their full potential. The book is written by Mr Michell's wife.

Scope Vic – www.scopevic.org.au/info_about_cp.html - is an organisation that provides services for those with physical or multiple disabilities. It has a website with information for people with disabilities or parents seeking basic medical information and information about available services. A useful basic guide.

Singleton, Dr Peter (2007) in **The Power of Listening: Celebrating Successful Stories of People with Cerebral Palsy** www.tccp.com.au/pdf/power_040208.pdf This is a powerful collection of individual stories from a range of people with cerebral palsy who recount aspects of their lives. I have met Dr Singleton at the Opera and then my mother told me about her recollections of him when he was at school with my uncle and at university with my mother. I was intrigued by his story so investigated the history of education for those with cerebral palsy.

I would like to thank **Mr John Lawson** for his time and the details he told me about being a parent of child with cerebral palsy in the middle of last century and for his strong encouragement to pursue my research in this topic.

I would like to acknowledge **Ms Marie Blackmore**, Research Coordinator with The Centre for Cerebral Palsy, for her assistance in accessing information about the current situation and for giving me a copy of **Early Recollections: Golden Jubilee 1951-2001** and for her support of my research efforts.