

eyes on autism

Issue 25 Winter 2020



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Message

FROM THE CEO & GM

What an extraordinary start to the year, for all of us. We began the year on an exciting range of projects: the opening of our new centre of excellence in Bald Hills, the sod-turning celebration to mark construction commencing on a new centre in Canberra, significant renovations to our centre in Toowoomba, and notably, our 15th anniversary!

While doing this, we were planning a number of staff training and support initiatives, and seeking opportunities to refine our service to ensure we're delivering the best supports available to the families in our care.

Of course, we were as surprised as everyone else when the global COVID-19 pandemic hit. It's been quite a journey for us since then, and we are proud of the way our team has responded.

AEIOU experienced a loss in revenue, and our fundraising efforts have been severely impeded. However, we have managed to adjust and adapt our service to ensure we can meet the needs of families enrolled in our service, while remaining viable in our operations. Every decision we made was with the security of all of our staff members in mind, and the care of children in every centre.

The service at AEIOU is successful because of the unique model we employ: all therapists and educators play a vital role in every child's therapy plan. They bring unique skills, and are trained across all of the disciplines to ensure a shared approach to the planning, implementation and the evaluation of every child's individual plan.

We adjusted our policies and procedures and implemented new systems to ensure our centres were safe, and could respond to the needs of our staff, children and families. This included changing our drop off and pick up procedures, introducing temperature checks and responding to new Government directives regarding the exclusion of sick children, and more.

We also ensured all families, in addition to our staff, had access to confidential, free counselling should they experience stress or burden as a result of the pandemic.

It is heartening to recognise the opportunities which arise in the midst of a crisis. In response to this serious event, our team developed a remote therapy service. We spent the first weeks of the pandemic preparing a response to ensure our families would not be greatly disadvantaged if the lockdown included childcare services (AEIOU operates under this licensing). Once we were confident of our service viability, we turned our attention towards those families in isolation. What could we do to ensure they weren't disadvantaged by this scenario?

We redeployed a team of senior therapists and educators to develop AEIOU@Home, which launched on 20 April. This service delivers two individual therapy consultations, two days of virtual classroom support and professional-grade training and support to families facilitating therapy at home.

We would like to thank our Executive Team for their guidance, leadership and support during these challenging times, in addition to the support of our Board directors. We also acknowledge the direction and support we have received from the Australian Government, across various departments. We are learning a great deal here at AEIOU throughout all of this, and we have been glad to work with such a supportive community (including all of our families, suppliers and donors) throughout this time.

We have been in touch with all of our friends and supporters, and wish each and every one the very best as we continue to navigate this new world. The road ahead will not be easy, for anybody. Please take care, and take our best wishes with you as you embark on the next steps.

We look forward to future events and opportunities to reconnect with you all.

Sincerely,

Alan Smith
CEO

Shane Klintworth
General Manager



Alan Smith



Shane Klintworth

CHAIR'S MESSAGE

Nobody could have predicted the events which have unfolded in 2020. The year commenced with a strong focus on reviewing and renewing the blueprint that will guide AEIOU over the next three years. People, culture, training and development were fundamental to this, in recognition that all of our staff are the driving force in delivering unique supports for young children and their families when they need it most. This job requires a unique balance of professional skill, compassion and resilience and we recognise the efforts our team makes each day as we continue to adjust to a changing landscape under the rollout of the NDIS.

The final stages of the rollout presented challenges throughout 2019, and with great effort our team adapted well. It is our desire to recognise this, and implement additional supports as we adjust our systems and processes.

We have also been on a trajectory of steady, conservative growth, with our new centre in Bald Hills opening, and construction underway for a new centre in Canberra.

As it happens, the world had other plans. COVID-19 has meant our leadership team and every staff member in our centres has had to work quickly and with steadfast commitment to provide the safest environment we can for our employees and families, without compromising the quality of the service.

Everybody has risen to the challenge and we have every reason to be confident that we will emerge from this crisis in good shape. This pandemic has presented a major disruption to our communities, our economy and our personal lives. It may have altered our course but our experience demonstrates that we have strong foundations and an ability to work quickly and effectively in any environment. It has delivered us opportunities to harness technology, think creatively and adjust our service in a way that will surely assist us to reach those in remote and regional areas in the near future.

We are returning our attention to our original priorities for the year, but in the meantime keeping a keen eye on this new world that we find ourselves

working in. I thank our executive for their stewardship in this time and all of the team at AEIOU. I also recognise our families, supporters and our Board of Directors. Stay safe.

Sincerely,

Susan Rix, AM



AEIOU COMING SOON TO Canberra

There is such demand for AEIOU's services that in the past, interstate families have moved to Queensland to be near one of our centres. We're thrilled to announce that ACT families will soon have access to a local AEIOU centre. Located in Garran, our latest purpose-built autism hub is scheduled to open its doors in 2021.

The official announcement of this milestone was celebrated onsite on 26 February, with guests including the Minister for Disability Suzanne Orr, CEO of the John James Foundation Joe Roff, and Chair of the John James Foundation, Paul Smith. The centre will provide evidence-based early intervention services for up to 40 families in the region.

Canberra couple Brian and Katy Meilak know firsthand what a difference AEIOU can make. Unable to connect with suitable services locally, they had previously moved part of their family to Queensland to access

AEIOU services for their son. Katy lived in Brisbane with Zachary for a year, while Brian stayed in Canberra with their daughter. Now the whole family is back home in Canberra and is delighted AEIOU services will soon be available in the ACT.

"I think if he (Zachary) hadn't done the program he would not have developed as far as he has, and the stress in the family would have been immense. A lot of couples with children on the spectrum separate because there is so much stress and tension. AEIOU works with the child and the family and it really does help keep families together. The year of separation was difficult but 100 percent worth it," Brian said.

AEIOU is extremely grateful to the John James Foundation for partnering with AEIOU Foundation and investing \$3.5million to establish this centre in Garran. This new development is only made possible with their support.



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A QUEENSLAND GREAT Honour



In June, AEIOU Foundation Founder and Patron, Dr James Morton received the honour of a Queensland Great Award, in recognition his legacy of work with AEIOU Foundation, the Leukaemia Foundation and ICON Cancer Centre.

The Queensland Greats Awards recognise the efforts and achievements of remarkable individuals and institutions, and James will be honoured alongside his contemporaries with a commemorative plaque displayed in the Roma Street Parkland, Brisbane.

James says for him, this award largely belongs to AEIOU and the people who have been behind the organisation at every step of the way. Here he reflects on AEIOU Foundation's 15th anniversary and being recognised by the State of Queensland for his contribution to the community.

"AEIOU has become a QLD Great over the last 15 years, providing high quality intensive early intervention for thousands of children and their families. It is with great pride that I look back over the 15 year journey, and look forward to what the future holds.

It was in 2002 that our son Andy was diagnosed with autism. He was two years old, with no speech, no toilet training, high levels of social phobia with the associated behaviour and tantrums. In 2003 we managed to enrol him in a pilot program at Junction Park, with a structure that included one teacher and two teacher aids. Andy being the seventh child to join the group. He made great strides, but 12 months later the program was closed and Andy and the other six children went to the local special school. The people working with Andy tried very hard for him but lacked the training and expertise in autism. As a result, hard fought skills were lost.

A small group met together to address this and AEIOU was born. Of that group Peter Kelly remains on the Board of Directors today and has been a rock, confidant, and source of wisdom over the 15 years. AEIOU stands for "Autism Early Intervention Outcomes Units". The five vowels reflect the challenges these children have with communication, the pink "a" and the blue "eiou" representing the ratio of one girl to every four boys diagnosed with autism back in 2005.

The challenge in the early years was to ensure that the service remained affordable and I am particularly proud that we were able to grow and evolve AEIOU while ensuring that no child missed out, irrespective of their social and financial circumstances. Prior to the NDIS, Commonwealth funding was limited to the childcare benefit and rebate (maximum \$15,000 per annum). The QLD government (through Minister Warren Pitt) created Australia's first Autism Early Intervention Initiatives (\$2 million in recurrent funding from 2006) which was critical to service development and explains why services in Queensland are far advanced over other states. This resulted in a gap of around \$10,000 per child which was addressed by fundraising, which was critical to the survival of AEIOU.

We are so thankful to all those people who have hiked (in all sorts of outfits), those businesses, individuals and the Foundation that sponsored a family via the 10:40:600 campaign, all the supporters who attended balls, made donations at Christmas time, and our ambassadors. Those who have championed our cause and supported our organisation include the marvellous artist, Tim Sharp and Alex Perry, who have been part of our journey since the very beginning. We have also received support from media personality Ian Skippen, Seven News presenter Pat

Welsh and Brisbane former Brisbane Bronco Corey Parker, to name just a few. I would like to especially mention Sullivan and Nicolaides, Pitcher Partners and Ross Forgan-Smith who made big commitments to an idea in 2005 and have never stopped. Other long term partners who have made so much of this possible include the Peabody and Hutchinson families, along with the Duke Foundation.

Perhaps the ultimate achievement has been building a team of passionate, highly skilled autism specialists who together have created, implemented and digitised the AEIOU curriculum. This enormous piece of work ensures quality, focus and consistency in service delivery wherever AEIOU operates and is the scaffold for future research and innovation. I would like to recognise all of our wonderful staff who work with our children every day and who completed this enormous undertaking. I especially acknowledge our long term CEO Alan Smith for his leadership and never-give-in attitude (exemplified by recovering from poor risk acute leukaemia and a bone marrow transplant and coming back to AEIOU stronger and even more determined).

The NDIS is the most important disability initiative in Australia's history with a mission and size that is unique on a population basis globally. As with any new scheme of this size there are many teething problems. I am proud of the advocacy that AEIOU has undertaken for children with autism and their families, protecting their right to access "necessary" evidence-based early intervention and ensure "reasonable" funding for this can be achieved. I would like to acknowledge key work done by Synergies Economics in partnership with AEIOU in assessing the cost of autism and the benefit cost ratio for high quality early intervention which have been critical pieces of work in defending access



Celebrating 15 YEARS.....

This year, AEIOU celebrates a milestone event: our 15th anniversary. AEIOU was first borne around a dining table in the early 2000s, inspired by the experiences of James and Louise Morton and their young son Andrew. In February 2005, the first AEIOU centre opened in Moorooka to deliver an intensive early intervention learning program for children with autism. Today, AEIOU has 10 centres supporting families across Brisbane, the Gold Coast, North Queensland and South Australia, and employs more than 300 staff.

In anticipation of our 15th anniversary we talked to some of our past students from AEIOU's first year of operation back in 2005. 15 years later, Sheridan, Oliver and Joey have graduated from year 12 and have started the next chapter in what Oliver aptly describes as 'Big Life.' The video is hosted on our website, www.aeiou.org.au, and is well worth watching.

As we make our way through our 15th year, we thank you for joining our community. As a family, supporter, partner and friend, if you have photos and stories that you would like to share with us about the impact AEIOU has made on you during the last 15 years we'd love to hear from you, please email communications@aeiou.org.au.

Pictured below: James and Andrew Morton in 2005.

to "good practice" with the NDIS. Challenges remain around consistency of assessment of need with different access partners but I have no doubt that families referred to AEIOU receive the very best support from our NDIS co-ordinators.

In looking forward to the next 15 years it is my hope that AEIOU will be able to reach all children of need, wherever they live in Australia and beyond our borders and that these children will transition into a supportive and knowledgeable school system and subsequent post school environment.

Crucial to achieving these aims will be the formation of an AEIOU Institute with a focus on research and development of programs for children in rural, remote and distant areas and training provision for current and future generations of therapy, educational, and post school providers. This basis for this is already starting with the recent COVID 19 experience resulting in the successful AEIOU@Home virtual service with implications for rural and remote service offerings and evolving area of robotics and the planned role for service inclusion by AEIOU.

In closing I would like to recognise the Board and senior executive who under Chairperson Susan Rix ensure the highest quality of service provision, management and strategy behind the operation of AEIOU.

The 15 years has been an amazing journey for Louise and me. I don't think Peter, and in fact any of us sitting around our dining table in 2004, would have envisaged in our wildest dreams where AEIOU would be in 2020. Everyone involved should take great pride in building a "QLD Great" and I hope you all continue to see no boundaries to what you can do over the next 15 years."

Dr James Morton, AM



LITTLE SUPERHEROES NEED YOUR Support



This year, we've heard of many courageous workers risking their own lives to save others. Whether that has been battling fires, contending with floods, or working to counter COVID-19; they have our respect and gratitude, and are a source of inspiration to us all. We like to think of our children as our little superheroes. They inspire us every day through their courageous acts and bravery. We are very grateful for the ongoing connection with our many of our supporters through these challenging times. We hope that our supporters are able to continue to help us, and we thank each and every one for simply being part of our great community. If you are able to donate, you can do so at www.aeiou.org.au/supportus.

A BEACON OF Hope

Jo and Jaz offer a story of hope for parents of young children with autism. Jaz first attended AEIOU at four, with considerable challenges. She's now 12: a courageous, accomplished and beautiful girl with dreams of a bright future. Jo, Jaz's Mum, shares some of their story.

"Jaz was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at 2 1/2. She wasn't speaking, eating, sleeping or making eye contact with people, and violent meltdowns were frequent.

I think we'd seen 11 GPs and a psychologist before we saw a paediatrician who diagnosed Jaz with autism. After that assessment, I didn't feel like there was a good outlook for Jaz and I didn't feel very hopeful for the future.

I didn't know anything about autism so spent my time accessing any information I could. I came across AEIOU and knew that's where I wanted Jaz to be, so I applied for a place at the Townsville centre in the hope we could get in. We did, so we moved. It was a rocky start moving to Townsville because everything had changed.

Up until I went to AEIOU I wasn't sure what my parenting approach would be. At AEIOU they had everything in one place, there was consistency, daily. Jaz's speech improved within her regular environment. The same staff were there and it helped with

her emotions. I tried to implement at home what they did at AEIOU, like the Picture Exchange Communication System, and I kept up with additional therapies where I could.

The progress Jaz made in a short period of time at AEIOU was incredible. You can't beat the intensive therapy that AEIOU provides. Their group learning model motivates them in an environment where they're safe to push boundaries. They want to have friends, fit in and belong. AEIOU gave her more courage than she had in a kindy setting.

I knew I couldn't keep Jaz wrapped in cotton wool and protected from the world; it wouldn't help her in adulthood. I've tried to instil in Jaz that autism is a difference not an excuse or reason. It was important for me to give her exposure to a lot of different environments. Growth occurs this way, coping strategies and with each little trip you make you learn something new.

Jaz has learnt to embrace her differences, sharing freely with other people helps them to understand why she behaves a little differently. She has started to grow up, mature and regulate her emotions. I've taught her to be her own advocate.

Jaz's time at AEIOU changed her destiny. Had we not gone there, I have no idea where we'd be.

The foundation for all the good that is happening now was laid there. I'm so grateful she got to go to AEIOU.

Now, Jaz is 12. Jaz is proud of who she is and proud of what makes her different.

Jaz is my hero and one of the most inspirational people I think I will ever know. She's an accomplished student who has started her first year of high school, which has so far been an amazing experience.

She has embraced change and is loving being able to try new things and make new friends. Alongside riding her bike and exploring Minecraft, she's found a new hobby as part of the sewing club.

She loves science and swimming and eating – actually, food is Jaz's life. Most of all, Jaz is determined to journey outside her comfort zone and take on new challenges. In her second week of high school, she attended camp.

Jaz is most looking forward to learning to drive a tractor with her Poppy now. As for when she grows up, she says she'll probably do something with cake decorating or science. No matter what she decides, she'll be great."

Jo Vella



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Staying safe

DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Along with everyone in our local communities and across the globe, AEIOU has made changes to help protect our children, families and staff from the risks of the coronavirus pandemic. Our centres remained open throughout the crisis, while we increased existing hygiene measures and introduced new procedures to help reduce the spread of infection.

It's wonderful to see that in the midst of this global crisis, the children continued to thrive, participating in their daily therapy programs and achieving their individual goals. We're inspired by the way everyone at our 10 centres rallied together to support each other. The spirit and goodwill expressed by our families to our frontline staff has been a wonderful reminder of all of the things we have to be grateful for.

Our parent training and workshop sessions moved entirely online, and are now presented in a webinar format. These informative webinars are designed to offer families practical strategies they can use at home. They cover a range of topics from behaviour and toileting, to social skills and communication.

On social media, we're still championing the achievements of our little learners across our centres, and sharing helpful resources for families. Connect with us on Facebook if you haven't already done so – seeing these wonderful young people celebrate their accomplishments is guaranteed to brighten your day.



COUNSELLING SUPPORT FOR PARENTS AND STAFF

At AEIOU we support our families and staff through our Employee Assistance Program. It is delivered by Assure Programs which provides psychological counselling, coaching and support.

Last year, AEIOU moved to ensure every family in our service had access to qualified, confidential counselling at no cost to them. In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, having the program already established

enabled us to provide our families and staff with an accessible option for extra support.

AEIOU families and staff have access to the service, and can receive referrals to other professional services if needed. Emergency support is also available 24/7. The service is completely confidential and can help with concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic, or anything that may be affecting their work or personal life.

Assure's psychologists offer support for:

- general feelings of anxiety or depression
- feeling overwhelmed
- personal issues
- family challenges
- loss of work
- absence from or returning to work
- grief and loss.

AEIOU families and staff can contact Assure at 1800 808 374 or info@assureprograms.com.au.

AEIOU@HOME: INNOVATION DURING A CRISIS



The risks presented by the COVID-19 pandemic meant many families either chose to, or were required to, self-isolate for a period of time. In response, AEIOU's senior therapists and educators established a new program that families could access online: AEIOU@Home. The service aims to help children retain skills and keep families connected to support.

AEIOU@Home consists of one-to-one consultations and virtual classroom sessions with children and their parents. It was developed and implemented by our senior team of specialists and educators.

The concept for the program was developed in March, when families began to self-isolate. By April, it was online and ready to support up to 40 families. AEIOU@Home wasn't designed to replicate a centre environment; the focus was on maintaining connections and helping ensure children retained the skills they had already developed.

Senior Occupational Therapist Meg Russell and Senior Teacher Schahana (Sharni) Clark were part of the team that developed and delivered the program.

Meg explained the key to the program's success would be to understand each child, their background, history and skillset. "So, we did our research and carefully reviewed each child's skills, their abilities and the challenges they faced, before we met them in the virtual classroom," Meg said.

"We've been really pleased with the achievements the children are making. If the child's goal was to sit for five minutes, then we didn't expect them to go beyond that. If they sat for 20 minutes, then that was great and actually exceeding our expectations."

Sharni agrees. "We acknowledged also, that children may like to build up activity over time, or that certain activities just might not be interesting to them. We reassured parents that it was okay if their child only participated in one activity. Maybe next time they'd be able to do two."

While parents were at home, the team held online consultations with them providing support, advice and guidance.

"During these consultations we talked about activities that would help them to maintain their child's skills and support them at home. We held sessions with parents to teach them strategies about vital skill development, such as sitting, waiting for a turn, and motivational and reinforcement techniques that were suitable for them, and their child. Families found our advice and feedback valuable, and useful throughout their day at home as well," Sharni said.

Head of Clinical Delivery, Claire McIvor, commended the team for the development of AEIOU@Home.

"Our team is very passionate about supporting the children in our care, and also their families. As the

COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, we were determined to ensure that no child would be disadvantaged," Claire said.

"The AEIOU@Home project demonstrates the calibre of our team as they adapted and responded to an intense and evolving situation. They're an example of what a great team can do.

"While the program cannot replace the benefits of a centre-based service where a child is part of a group therapy program, it is fantastic to be able to offer a remote support alternative to families if they need it."

Claire also explains parental feedback has been positive, with many parents feeling more connected to their child's learning experience and gaining new insights into the level of supports available to their family. "We'll invite all parents to complete a survey upon the completion of the first phase of this service, but the early indicators are exciting - this remote service may prove to be a quality source of support for families in various circumstances in the future."



A SMILE ON THE DIAL

Every time the Lord Mayor's Charitable Trust of Brisbane supports us, it brings a smile to the faces of our children. Whether it's helping to fund a centre Christmas party, donating Easter eggs for the children, or much-needed educational resources to help build our children's play and social skills, the Trust provides much needed financial support. This year the Trust made sure an Easter Bunny basket was delivered to our Nathan centre, much to the delight of the children and staff.

Congratulations Linh!

EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR, 2019

Linh Huynh is our 2019 Employee of the Year! At AEIOU, one of the ways we celebrate our team is through our Staff Reward & Recognition Program, which is based on our values of Support, Teamwork, Excellence and Passion (STEP). Linh's colleagues, and all of us at AEIOU, are thrilled that Linh's exceptional work has been recognised.

Linh is an Occupational Therapist and for the last 2 1/2 years has been an integral part of our AEIOU Toowoomba centre, where she's very much appreciated by the children, families and her team. She shares some of her experiences at AEIOU and how she felt receiving the Employee of the Year award.

"Before I started at AEIOU, I was on the search for an opportunity to work with children and their families that was fun, crazy, challenging, and rewarding. What really attracted me to join AEIOU was the organisation's mission and values, they were something I could see myself working towards every day.

The individuals that I get to work with, the families and the children are what inspire me. My team and colleagues go above and beyond every day, and put up with my jokes, our families show me what true dedication really is, and our children who keep me on my toes never cease to amaze me," Linh said.

"Seeing the progress that our children make from when we first met them, whether big or small, or whether we've been working on the goal for a week or for months, is amazing.

Having a little girl say "*Linh are you okay?*" when I accidentally fall off my chair; watching a little boy hand out a celebratory piece of graduation cake to each one of his friends; a group of four friends waiting for their turn on a swing; every single time a child is toilet trained; a little girl grabbing my hand and leading me to the cupboard to request for her favourite musical toy; a group of children copying the actions to one of my favourite song, *Wheels on the Bus* - I could go on. These little moments are what keeps me coming back.

I'm proud of the relationships I have formed with my team and our families. I love that I have the opportunity to create those bonds with our families, chat about food and other interests (mostly food), and work towards giving our children the best chance of achieving the skills that will set them up for their next big chapter.

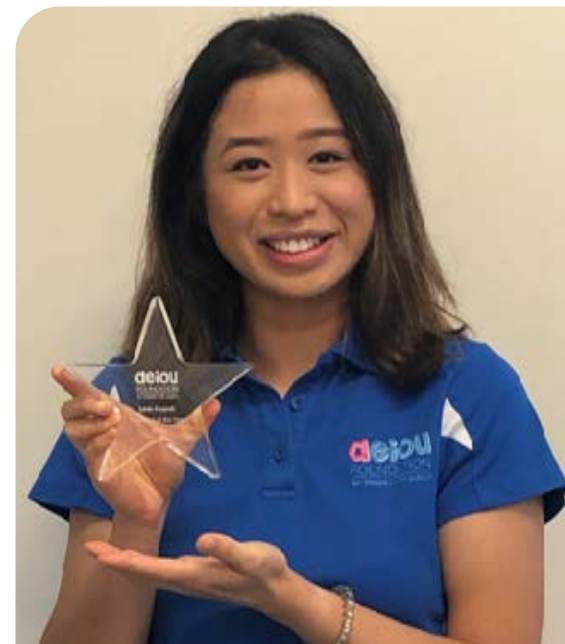
It will come as no surprise to anybody that the industry we have chosen can be challenging and tiring at times - but it is also incredibly rewarding and fun. Where else could a grown adult come

to work dressed as a giant parrot and have no one bat an eye?

Being recognised as the 2019 Employee of the Year was something I never expected; I was shocked, surprised, thankful, grateful and happy. But I could not do what I do without the support of an incredible team right there with me.

To every single person within our organisation who comes to work every day to do a job, and does it with excellence, passion, dedication, kindness, positivity, excitement, compassion, sincerity, patience, and a crazy sense of humour - I say thank you."

...the industry we have chosen can be challenging and tiring at times - but it is also incredibly rewarding and fun.



AEIOU LIGHTS UP BRISBANE FOR WORLD AUTISM AWARENESS DAY

Brisbane's Story Bridge and City Hall were aglow in pink and blue lights on World Autism Awareness Day, which is celebrated around the globe every year on April 2. It was a wonderful reminder that despite the changes we're experiencing, there are many constants in life and reasons to celebrate.

Our AEIOU centres did a little celebrating of their own, holding morning teas and dress up days. Pictured right: they had lots of fun!



Official opening of NORTH

Fifteen years ago, AEIOU set out to meet the needs of young children with autism, at a time when there was very limited access to specialist therapy, care and support. Since then, AEIOU has supported thousands of children to develop life-changing skills. The official opening of our newest centre, AEIOU Bald Hills Centre for Autism, is the next step in maintaining and growing part of our vision. Centre Manager Brigitte Pernusch and her team were thrilled to welcome guests to the centre's official opening on March 6.

It was a glorious day to celebrate. We were joined by the Federal Member for Petrie and Assistant Minister for Community Housing, Homelessness and Community Services The Hon. Luke Howarth; AEIOU Chair Susan Rix AM; Founder & Patron Dr James Morton AM; Lady Mayoress Nina Schrinner; families (past and present); neighbours and the AEIOU team.

Our new centre replaces a much smaller, aging facility in nearby Bray Park where local families experienced long delays to gain access to AEIOU

services. We've nearly doubled our capacity with up to 50 local children now able to access our therapy and support. In the future, the centre will facilitate training, outreach services and research programs.

Brigitte Pernusch, Centre Manager at AEIOU Bray Park and now at the new Bald Hills centre, was integral to the new centre's development and is delighted at the end result.

"AEIOU Bald Hills is a state-of-the-art facility, where our programs are going to go from strength to strength and be even more fantastic.

"It was a privilege to contribute to the development of this centre. Every detail was important, it had to be just right for the children, and our staff. Making choices about interior design, furniture, resources and equipment for each room, that were suitable for young children with autism, was hard work and very rewarding," Brigitte said.

Together with architects, The Buchan Group, Brigitte and the team have introduced 'Andi Little,' a character

with autism who is printed onto the interior walls. Andi has been the inspiration behind the stories, themes and colours throughout.

"It's quite a unique approach and it was really important that Andi likes the things that young children with autism like. Andi can be spotted driving a boat, plane, train or truck, or playing dress-ups as a pirate, firefighter or pilot. We spent a great deal of time to ensure Andi's appearance and character was just right," Brigitte said.

AEIOU CEO Alan Smith commended Brigitte and her team for their extraordinary contribution in the development of the centre.

"This is a team that is driven, precise and committed, not only to our families and AEIOU, but to each other.

"This centre demonstrates what can be achieved by a team of passionate staff. It was hard work, and I am sure this team, and everyone involved, can look back now and be incredibly proud of their efforts."

Strong and determined:

Jackson loves being outside, riding a trike, and playing with trucks, trains and cars. He's five years of age and his world is a lot different compared to when he first came to AEIOU in April 2019. There have been achievements and highlights, big and small. Jackson's Mum, Joanne, reflects on when it all began.

"Jackson was born in July 2015. It was just after his older brother Gasnier (Gazzy), who was three at that time, had been diagnosed with autism. It was a tough time, adjusting to life with a new baby, as well as a small child with high needs. I didn't know then that what I'd been through with Gazzy, I was about to go through again with Jackson.

He was seven months when I knew something just wasn't right. He'd started rocking back and forth on his knees, no matter what I did I couldn't get his attention. He hated being held and was screaming in the bath, and while being dressed. He'd scream at loud noises, even at the arrival of the garbage truck.

Even though Jackson was different to Gazzy, I felt like their experiences were similar, and I was more aware of the signs of autism. So I deliberately started activities with Jackson as a baby, drawing on the skills I'd already learned with Gazzy. I did lots of floor play, talking and chatter. I sought advice, arranged for therapy support and started to learn even more about autism by attending workshops and training seminars.

Jackson was three when he was diagnosed with autism by a paediatrician. It wasn't something I found easy, but I felt relieved and I didn't feel crazy anymore. It meant I could get the level of help and support he needed. I knew the importance of starting early as I'd seen how Gazzy had developed after his therapy.

With Jackson, I took on a lot of advice from a whole range of specialists. There was a time where all I talked about was autism - to anyone who would listen. Finding the right care and support through disability services was tedious, and it felt like such a long

process to go through. Mostly, I felt like I just wasn't being heard. I even felt my family didn't understand. But I know now that my family just wanted to help me. I was beginning to feel depressed and lacking in confidence. And I could see I was becoming a bit fixated.

Since starting at AEIOU, Jackson has come so far. There are so many things he can do now, which he was not doing before. He can feed himself and speaks more words. He's receptive and determined. He can follow two-step instructions, sit still for five minutes and has started to help me to get him dressed. He can even sit in the bathtub without screaming now, and I can wash his face. Imagine the difference it makes in your home to have your child no longer screaming!

Seeing the difference from when Jackson started at AEIOU has been amazing. He has just had his second assessment and I'm so happy with his progress. Initially, I didn't think he was achieving as much as what I'd hoped. I was wanting too much too quickly, because of what I was putting in.

BRISBANE'S NEW AUTISM HUB

Brigitte agrees and recognises the efforts of her entire team.

"Our staff have been phenomenal all the way. I'm so proud of the solid team that they are, they are so passionate and engaged in what they do. That's why after 12 years, I love being part of the AEIOU team. The staff, service and programs are incomparable to anything I have ever had the privilege to be involved in."

"It will be the children who will receive the lifelong benefits from their early years at this centre, and I'm delighted to be part of that journey," Brigitte said.

The new AEIOU Bald Hills Centre for Autism centre features four activity rooms, therapy rooms, motor skills rooms and two outdoor playgrounds in a warm, natural setting. It was made possible with \$4.5 million funding investment from the Australian Government and the support of the Anglican Schools Commission through a peppercorn lease of the land.



We've nearly doubled our capacity in Bald Hills. Now up to 50 local children can benefit from our life-changing therapy and care.

THAT'S JACKSON

A little step forward for a typically developing child was a huge step for Jackson. I thought that because of what I'd been through with Gazzy, I understood what to do. But they are both different children, and I needed to remember that. And, once you start seeing some results, it's a wonderful feeling.

I still do individual therapy with Jackson, though it's the structure and routine to the AEIOU program which is similar to school that is important for his future. The chance to play with kids his own age and learn about the social aspect of being a child makes a difference. His therapy team implements his individual program in a group classroom setting and that's helping him to achieve his goals. They get to see Jackson for who he really is, and what he's like, and not just observe him in a room with just myself and a therapist. In all of this, they see how he actually functions, and they see his potential.

I've built wonderful relationships with the staff at AEIOU, and they are all

brilliant. In every one there is a passion for what they do. My confidence has improved, I'm listened to and am uninhibited when talking about Jackson's care. I'm comfortable talking with anyone in the team, whether that's in a meeting or one-to-one, and I've never felt like any question is too silly.

It's even helped me at the school that Jackson's brother Gazzy now attends. I've formed a very natural relationship with the school's teachers, aides and everyone involved in Gazzy's learning, which is based on mutual respect. This will help me make choices for Jackson as we come to the end of this year and consider what schooling looks like for him in the future. I'm not sure what road that will take yet, and I take a day a time. I know that I'll make the right decision for Jackson, at the right time.

When I think back to early 2019, I am amazed at how far Jackson has come. I'm so thankful and happy that Jackson's been given the best possible start in his life."

Joanne Emblem



Jackson attends the new Bald Hills centre and he loves the new environment. There's plenty to explore.

Mason

IS MAKING GREAT GAINS

Mason turned five in April and he's going to Big School next year. The future is looking bright! Mason's Mum, Jade, offers a glimpse into their journey.

"We knew something wasn't right when Mason was six months. He wouldn't cry and he used to lay on the floor and just stare at the fan. He wouldn't play or make eye contact and he wasn't engaging with us. He never felt 'present'.

It was my Mum who first suggested we see our family GP, who had been our doctor since I was young, and who then referred Mason to a paediatrician. At that time, the paediatrician had said everything was fine and I thought: well, if we've been told by a specialist that he's okay, he must be. Six months later though, we returned to our family GP who referred us to another paediatrician. It was quite disheartening to have been dismissed by the first.

Mason was two when he received a diagnosis of autism. We were shocked and saddened to know there was something different about Mason. But, at the same time, it was a relief. He was so frustrated and we didn't know how to help him, because we didn't know what was wrong. We didn't ever care what Mason's diagnosis was we just wanted to help him be the best version of himself that he could be.

When we started doing individual therapy with Mason, a disability service advisor mentioned AEIOU to us. We thought it sounded like a good place for him so we made a phone call to AEIOU in December 2017. We were lucky they had a place available and he started the following January.

When Mason first started at AEIOU he could only say 10 words and he was constantly having meltdowns - sometimes for up to four hours. He was aggressive, throwing things, overstimulated and frustrated all the time. He couldn't get across what he needed and so he lashed out. He was struggling with eating and he had sensory processing issues. His assessment indicated his speech ability was that of an eight month baby. Now, his assessment indicates he is hitting the milestones of a child his age.

The team at AEIOU started to work on was his behaviour first - it was a priority because he was harming himself. Within two weeks his meltdowns had halved. And, he was toilet trained in the centre in just two days. The strategies they put in place to help calm him were effective and we felt he was where he needed to be: in a controlled environment where there was understanding, help and the team knew what to do. It helped at home too. It's been lifechanging.

One of the hardest things has been not being able to enjoy family outings. Mason used to run away. He'd just take off and we'd spend the whole time chasing him, and scared for his safety. And, it was scary for us to not know if he'd ever be able to make friends because he didn't bond well or talk to other children. We wondered: will he make friends?

Now he's making and sustaining friendships and has a good little group of friends. About 18 months ago we took Mason to a birthday party, before he would have run around like a headless chook. But it was different now. Here he was sitting down and wanting to play parcel-the-parcel, hold hands with the other children, and be part of it. It was amazing.

There were some dark times and sometimes we didn't feel like there was a light at the end of the tunnel. We feel that autism is a journey and the best results come from a team of people, both professional and family, who are willing to learn and be educated on how to best help and support each child. We have been very lucky to have found this in the Gold Coast AEIOU centre and through our amazing family who have been there from the start and willing to do whatever it takes.

I'm excited for Mason, he is such a smart incredible little boy and he's got a bright future ahead of him."

Jade Raggio

We feel that autism is a journey and the best results come from a team of people, both professional and family, who are willing to learn and be educated on how to best help and support each child.





BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS FOR BEHAVIOUR THERAPY DAY.....

We're always looking for new ways to celebrate our teams and help people better understand what we do at AEIOU. On March 20 we held an official AEIOU 'Behaviour Therapy Day'. Behaviour Therapists are a vital part of the AEIOU team as they help reduce some of the social or learning barriers children with autism often experience. Each team member works with each other to share the responsibility of planning, implementing and evaluating each child's plan.

Our Senior Behaviour Therapist Anna Brodie explains the foundation of supporting each child is in building a positive relationship with the children and knowing what motivates them is an important part in overcoming these barriers.

"We spend a lot of time building rapport and finding things the child loves. The real key to building a great relationship with the child in the beginning is to be accepting and flexible to what the child chooses to do, have fun with them, play and let them guide the way. Once we determine what motivates a child to learn, we look for ways to help reduce their barriers, by teaching replacement skills and supporting the child to become more independent in their daily life."

AEIOU's Behaviour Therapists also help to educate parents so they feel better equipped to help their child reach their potential.

"It's a real privilege, that families allow us to be able to work with their children, and it's not something any of us take for granted. Families put their trust in us to provide support, advice and guidance," Anna said.

"We know that parents are doing their best, so our goal is to support them and give them some strategies that can help them to feel more equipped to support their child in the home environment."

Seeking early intervention can be a daunting experience for families. There's a lot of information to navigate. At AEIOU, we focus on the individuality of each child and finding the right fit to support each child's learning and development.

"Each child is so different and they're all little individuals. That's what makes it fun, at AEIOU we look at each child as an individual and tailor their goals and program to suit their needs."

It's a real privilege, that families allow us to be able to work with their children, and it's not something any of us take for granted.

CHAMPIONS CHALLENGE EXTREME: NOT FOR THE FAINTHEARTED!

It was a courageous bunch who embarked on the inaugural fundraising event, Champions Challenge Extreme, along the stunning South West coast of Tasmania from 6 to 15 March. The Challenge is the brainchild of a group of mates who wanted to challenge themselves and make a real and life-changing difference to children with autism. 'Team Jacob' headed off on the trek of a lifetime in true champion style. Together this amazing team of eight raised over \$10,000 for children with autism.



TOOWOOMBA TENACITY

10th Annual Take A Hike

Southern Downs folk turned up with true community spirit for our 10th annual *Take A Hike* at Toowoomba Park in March. Together they raised over \$16,000 for children with autism - an incredible achievement. We especially want to recognise the young men of Toowoomba Grammar who participate every year, and raised over \$5,600 this year!

The event took place before strict government restrictions for public gatherings were implemented, although the event was scaled down in response to the emerging pandemic, with health and hygiene measures increased to ensure the wellbeing of the community and participants. It was great to see everyone practising the physical distancing measures recommended at the time, while enjoying their time out in the sun for such a great cause.



TOOWOOMBA CENTRE TAKES NEW SHAPE

Our Toowoomba children, families and team will be returning to a newly renovated centre in July. Works commenced in February this year, and while renovations have been underway, the children and team temporarily relocated to a neighbouring Goodstart Early Learning Centre.

The Toowoomba centre has almost doubled in size, and features new facilities and spaces to support and engage the children. The interior has been completely remodelled and renovated, improving flow and access throughout, with additional indoor and outdoor spaces created for therapy, programs and play.

Centre Manager Sandy Peachey said being part of the project was a wonderful experience, and that the opportunity to build a better future for even more children with autism made it truly rewarding.

"I first came to AEIOU 13 years ago, and at the time there were four children enrolled. I had been supporting children with special needs at a local primary school and it was heartbreaking to see children coming to school at the ages of six, seven or eight who weren't able to communicate or achieve their milestones.

"I wanted to make a difference, and I knew early intervention was the key - that's why I joined AEIOU. Today, our therapies and programs support up to 18 children in Toowoomba and across the Downs every year, and there are local families on our waiting list," Sandy said.

The Toowoomba centre was established in 2007 with critical support from a much-loved local GP, Rhonda Greensill, who has since passed away. Her legacy lives on through AEIOU Toowoomba, named The Rhonda Greensill Centre in her honour. Local community support also continues, through generous financial assistance and fundraising activities. An official opening is scheduled for September.





IT'S BEEN A JOURNEY TO GET TO WHERE WE ARE NOW.

Don't give up!

Ethan is five and will be going to Big School next year. Elizabeth, Ethan's Mum, says "don't give up".

"Ethan's doing really well and we're so impressed with where he's at. He started at AEIOU in April 2018. Before that, he was attending a mainstream childcare centre where he wasn't getting the support the needed. It was one of the childcare centre staff who suggested AEIOU for Ethan, and they spoke highly of the program.

It was quite a journey to get to where we are now. When Ethan was 9 months our family day care provider at the time mentioned small things that Ethan wasn't doing, and that he should have been. He wouldn't stop looking out the window and it was a struggle for her to get his attention. She brought it up with me a few times, but I was in denial. She told us that the sooner we get some help the better because he could get the support he needed if we started early.

Deep down, I knew too that something wasn't quite right. Ethan would cry uncontrollably for no reason. I'd think he was hungry, had a wet nappy or was tired. I even thought: perhaps he's got colic. We kept taking him to see the doctor, and while he was meeting his physical developmental milestones, he still wasn't talking, and he was walking on his tippy toes. He was getting cars and other toys and lining them up rigidly. It wasn't normal behaviour.

Taking Ethan through the process of obtaining a diagnosis was hard. He had a meltdown at the paediatrician's office so an occupational therapist had

to visit him at the childcare centre. Ethan was about 18 months when he was diagnosed.

I thought it would be great to finally find out the cause of his behaviour and to get Ethan the help he needed. I was of the opinion that Ethan had autism because of the advice we'd received so far and the signs that were there. But when we were told he had autism, I just could not stop crying; and I cried and cried. After these initial feelings, we tried to learn more about autism and how to support Ethan. We had appointments with behaviour therapists and speech therapists and applied for funding to help with the costs this involved.

When we decided it was time to move Ethan away from his mainstream childcare centre, we visited AEIOU to see if it was the right place for us. Right from the start Ethan found something he loved. He has always loved anything to do with the sea - such as whales, dolphins, turtles - so when he spotted a grey whale toy, he loved it. The centre has a Turtle Room, Dolphin Room and Nemo Room. It's almost like it was arranged just for us. In the beginning physically getting Ethan to go to AEIOU was a struggle because he doesn't respond well to anything out of his routine. But his love for the grey whale was a drawcard. He knew he'd get to see it at AEIOU.

Right away the staff began to work on his speech, toilet training and set about establishing a routine. Everyday Ethan's speech was getting better and his communication has improved.

When he started at AEIOU he was not talking at all. He couldn't even say yes or no. Now, he's saying things like 'more water please Mummy'.

Initially I was a little concerned about a group therapy program. Ethan mimics and imitates a lot so I thought it may not be good for him to follow what the other children do. But because there were a lot of kids who were more advanced than him, it has helped him. He talks about the children in his class, he knows all the teacher's names and he points them out in photos.

The real eye opener for me about how well Ethan was doing at AEIOU came when I was playing with a Rubik's cube at home. Ethan came and sat next to me. He pointed to one of the colours and said "red". I thought it was a guess, so I turned the tiles around to another colour and he said "white". I kept doing that, and he got the colours right every time. I was so excited: he knows colours! That was the moment when I realised the amazing work that AEIOU were doing with Ethan, and I really had no idea.

As a parent with a child with autism, I understand how it feels. We kept looking for help and AEIOU's Gold Coast centre has turned out to be the best thing for Ethan. We learned from our mistakes too. So many times, we've tried things that haven't worked out. We just keep trying different things.

Persevere and keep looking for help. Don't give up, it's worth it."

Elizabeth Webber

Speak WITH OUR NDIS TEAM TODAY

AEIOU is proud to have a dedicated team of NDIS Transition Support Coordinators to help map out your next steps so your family can receive the best outcome possible.

Our support service is **FREE** to all families who hope to enrol at AEIOU Foundation.

Phone **(07) 3320 7500** and ask for Katrina or Sean, or email ndis@aeiou.org.au.



OUR SUPPORTERS

