

Aradia's Story

(Adelaide, 2015)

Thirty years ago, while at high school, I was employed in my first part time job at Kmart in a NSW country town. On completion of year 10, I then gained full-time employment with what was then known as the Department of Social Security. At the age of 19, I undertook an apprenticeship in beauty therapy and worked full time in that industry. At the age of 26, I was diagnosed with narcolepsy (a neurological sleep disorder), and after a few months of trying different medications was able to again return to work. At this point, I underwent a career change and began a 9 year career as a swimming teacher. During this time, I was also married and gave birth to my beautiful son. My health continued to decline, so I was forced to reduce my number of hours at work. Two years after the birth of my son, I was separated from my now ex-husband and subsequently divorced. In addition to my declining state of health, I now also had the pressures of single parenthood.

By the time my son had turned 6 I found myself in a position of utter exhaustion, compounded by my disability. This eventuated in my withdrawal from paid employment. I decided to undertake university studies as this offered me the opportunity to do the bulk of my study at home, and the flexibility to be able to study when my narcolepsy was more manageable.

Initially, I began full-time study in a double degree that resulted in a Bachelor of Social Science and a Bachelor of Health Science. This was meant to be a four year degree, but due to my declining health and sole parenting responsibilities I was forced to drop back to part-time study. I earned the marks to continue into an honours degree that is currently due for completion. It is my intention to continue with a PhD, as I find academics to be much more accommodating to both my disability and parenting duties.

Over the last decade I have continually faced the decline of my health, the weight of raising a child on my own, the lack of family support (due to distance), and the management of a study regime that needs to accommodate parenting, and disability management. I am now finding it increasingly difficult to undertake the day to day activities of life that most (as indeed I myself did) take for granted. My medication costs more and more each year.

The increase in the cost of study has been matched by a continual decline in the government assistance I have received, even after being a hard-working, tax-paying citizen for half of my life. I am increasingly overwhelmed with the stress associated with the rising costs of raising a child on my own. Clothes, school supplies, after-school activities and entertainment increase as he gets older. My living costs are increasing constantly.

In addition, there is the stress of continually having to deal with Centrelink: the policies that are never static, understaffed offices and long waits that as a Centrelink client you are forever subjected to. Upon applying for the disability support pension, I was faced with a multitude of barriers that the Centrelink policies did not address. Firstly, when I applied for DSP the staff did not even have a clue as to the nature of my illness and went on to report that I had an undiagnosed illness, when in fact, narcolepsy is not all that uncommon. After finally finding someone who was able to deal with the nature of my illness, we then proceeded to complete the application. This resulted in the computer

system being unable to process my claim because I was not able to undertake daytime employment (narcolepsy is characterised by excessive daytime sleepiness), but I could have applied for night work. However, as a single parent night work is most definitely not an option. Consequently, the system did not recognise either my disability or my parenting responsibilities. Nor did it understand that I could only study at times suitable to my condition. To be continually having to explain myself over and over to staff in order to receive my payment only managed to contribute to the stress load I was already carrying .

I did not ask for this illness. I did nothing to cause it and have had to endure an entire change to my lifestyle in order to accommodate the ongoing symptoms of narcolepsy.

I did not ask to be a single parent. I did not enter into marriage or child rearing with the notion that I would become a single parent. I did not expect my ex-husband to not pay child support. Nor did I ever expect that I would become what basically amounts to a second-class citizen due to circumstances beyond my control. I am tired of being considered a burden on the system, and I often wonder why the notion of unpaid care work (in regards to single parenting) and its economic contribution to this nations' GDP is continually overlooked and ignored.

The continued stress that is placed upon people like myself in regards to financial support is never a good thing. In fact, all logic would seem to point to the potential that this additional stress could and will place extra demands on an already overburdened health system. With the release of the current government's budget reforms, my stress has now heightened to a point that the constant worry is indeed beginning to affect the way in which I cope. I wonder how the proposed amendments will affect me. If my FTB were removed now that my son is over the age of 6, I am not in a position to seek work in order to make up that loss. Are my son and myself just expected to cop the loss and become further impoverished? I want to be able to budget long-term, not be a position where within weeks I could potentially lose an important portion of my income.

I am concerned about not only the proposed budget cuts but also about the release of the McClure report. I am worried that I will again have to endure countless hours of having to explain my condition over and over. I am also concerned that my health issues and parenting responsibilities will be impacted by any decrease in my current income. I am already worrying about how to pay for school expenses, after-school activities, utilities and groceries. I do not need the added stress that this is bringing.

I have prided myself on providing a safe, loving and secure environment as I raise my son. It is as much for his sake as my own that I agreed to provide my story. I want security for my son and myself in terms of a living wage. I do not wish for my son to grow up watching his mother's health continually decline as she shoulders the additional worries about the basic provisions in life. I want my son to be able to gain a good quality education that is not restricted by the elitism that deregulation of the education sector promises.

In conclusion, I would like to see amendments for greater support for the most vulnerable in our community, not the harsh neo-liberal policies of economic rationalisation that for someone like myself seem to be more of a punishment than a step towards equality.