

## **"We'll build him a house!"**

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Approximately twenty years ago, when David acquired a brain injury from an accident, everyone in the family was thrown into a re-evaluation of everything they had known. David spent over a year in hospital and rehab, then, as Brenda recalls, "they just sent him home" with the apparent expectation that the family would supply all David's support needs. There was no funding to speak of and no substantial assistance. Beyond the 'Stepping Out' program David attended which provided 3-4 hours of recreational choices in community art classes and so forth, David lived at home with his parents, where his days were filled with walking, helping in the house and garden and his love of playing the piano.

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## **"I didn't know what I didn't know"**

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Brenda contacted the Community Living Project who helped her think about the future. This contact helped the family think about some of the issues that would most likely face David and helped them focus on David's strengths and interests and on what he really wanted in his life. For the first time since the accident, the family was encouraged to dream about David's future. The result of that dreaming was the statement "We'll build him a house!" Brenda laughs that she had no idea what she was doing: "I didn't know what I didn't know!" The process of realising the dream was a very gradual one, with a steep learning curve. Bits of the puzzle fell into place one by one over a series of years. The family formed a kind of 'executive committee' overseeing the project.

First there was the block of land to think about. One of David's sisters had a vacant block she no longer wanted to live on, so the family's first challenge was to squeeze enough money together to buy the land for David.

Another of his sisters then suggested they have a look at a mud brick house she knew about and they went to see this and even helped out with the mud brick making. David had also around this time acquired about eight hours' funding per week. The family approached Chris, an experienced mud brick builder, about helping David build a house.

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## **'Block Day'**

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Brenda, her husband and David all attended mud brick workshops and began to learn what was involved in being an owner-builder. Chris and David, who likes gardening, tackled the weeds on the block. Chris had contacts in the building industry that were to prove invaluable to the project. A mud brick maker was procured, a plan was selected and they got started. Brenda smiles about how basic

some of the techniques were, remembering how they measured levels at the time of digging foundations with water in hoses. For a long time the building was done by family, friends, Chris and his friends. David's support workers with building experience were enlisted and Tuesday became, for David "block day". Some more funding was acquired from money allocated to older carers, so David's supports were building over time too. The actual building process took eight years, but, as Brenda recalls, David wasn't yet ready to move anyway. He needed substantial 1:1 support, but was improving his walking and other skills over time and through his involvement with the building project. One thing that Brenda said really made this David's home and not just a house was that he became familiar with it from the ground up. Despite a very significant sight deficit, David soon learned the exact location of all rooms and walls well before he would move into the house.

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**"I think I have learned as much from what didn't work as what did"**

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Sadly, Brenda's husband did not live long enough to see David move in, and because of her own changed circumstances, Brenda moved in with David to begin with. She recalls the look of horror on David's face, as if to say "You're not coming in too?" She reassured him that her things were only to stay for a while and once her own arrangements were finalised Brenda moved next door so as to still be close at hand. David now lives in his home with about 29 hours of support that have been largely acquired through persistence and the help of the Community Living Project.

Brenda encourages people to think together as a family. Not having funding in place doesn't need to be a barrier to getting started in small ways. Trial and error will surely be involved and Brenda observes, "I think I have learnt as much from what didn't work as what did." She confesses that they really didn't know how they were going to realise their dream for David, but is sure that, having decided on one, they had something powerful that drove them forward.