



# JUSTINE AND LEANNE

**W**hen Justine was eight months of age, I realised she wasn't reaching her milestones. I began the trek of doctor's visits, appointments, tests, waiting for results and trying to understand what these professionals were telling me. We began weekly physio, monthly speech pathology and occupational therapy; and became regular visitors to our paediatrician who diagnosed Justine with Global Developmental Delay with Autistic traits. Autism? What did that mean and how would this condition impact on Justine's life and mine?

Looking back on that time, I found that perhaps the most frustrating thing for me was that Justine didn't walk until she was four years of age. Her commencing kindergarten in the support class at Curran Public School at Macquarie Fields was a time of great pride and anxiety for me. Her teachers didn't understand special needs and they needed to understand my daughter and fine-tune their expectations as Justine tried to fit into this busy, noisy educational setting. I became a regular visitor to the classroom to assist Justine and her teachers to manage Justine's obsessive and challenging behaviour. I knew my daughter didn't mean to be disruptive. She just couldn't cope with the sounds, lights, crowds, smells and changes in the same way as the other children. I needed to help other people understand this.

Deciding to change schools for Justine was a difficult decision for me to make. It took three visits to Mater Dei School before I decided that we should become members of this beautiful community and what a blessing the experience has been for both of us. Justine was challenged by her new teachers and in turn she tested every teacher! Now Justine is in Year 12, a student

councillor and regularly represents Mater Dei at community functions. She has become more independent and gained greater self-confidence. She understands boundaries, rules, expectations and routines and accepts responsibility for her decisions.

I too have faced my share of challenges. On reflection, the hardest thing for me has been trusting others to help me in the care of my daughter and to 'let go' so that Justine could experience independence. The decision to allow Justine to participate in the Living Skills Program was one of these occasions. However with encouragement from the Living Skills staff and her teachers, I accepted a scholarship from a '2 Blues Partner' for her to join the program. Justine loves these nights away from home with her friends, and so do I. On these nights I have some 'Leanne time' when I can catch up with my friends and take care of all the things a mother has to do.

I will always be grateful for the support of the Mater Dei team and my family. My parents, Joan and Russell and my sister Maree, have attended many Mater Dei masses, assemblies and G-Days and have supported and loved us both unconditionally for the last 18 years. I am also thankful for my partner, Mark, who came into our lives when Justine was two years of age, and has been a father to her in every way.

This December Justine will graduate from Mater Dei. Like most Mater Dei parents at this time of their child's life, I feel my child is not ready to leave school and worry what the future will hold for both of us. However, we will move on knowing that we have friends here who will always be keen to hear Justine's news as she begins her Post School Program in 2014.

**Leanne Cross**