

**NDIS**

**RHONDA MILLER**

**Passionate  
advocate  
finds  
her calling**

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## Now people have choice and control over the services they receive.

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Having worked at CareSouth for 15 years, with a wealth of experience across Disabilities and Out-of-Home Care (OOHC), Rhonda Miller has seen a lot of changes in the sector, most significantly the shift away from institutionalised care in the 1980s and more recently, the roll-out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). For Rhonda, who grew up wanting to be a nurse, there is no doubt that she found her calling in the Disabilities sector. “I do love to work with families. You meet some incredible people. I think that’s what I was meant to do,” she says.

There have been some sad stories but they’re far outweighed by the inspiring moments Rhonda feels fortunate to have been a part of throughout her career. Rhonda frequently reaches for the tissues as she shares the highs and lows of working in a sector that presents many challenges but where the rewards are life-changing. She recalls supporting a 12-year-old boy with significant disabilities while working for Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC).

“The family were struggling and couldn’t afford a wheelchair-accessible van. And you couldn’t get funding for that,” said Rhonda. “They never did anything together as a family because of the transport issues. Through fundraising, I got them enough money for a van and the modifications they needed. The day they showed me, they said: ‘you did this for us’. It was a happy moment. That was maybe 20 years ago but it has stayed with me.”

Rhonda also recalls a four-year-old girl who learned to walk in the institution in which she trained. It was before the Richmond Report in the 1980s saw the end of institutionalised care in favour of loved ones being supported in their own homes with their families.

“Sometimes parents came to visit and sometimes they didn’t,” said Rhonda. “But I’ll never forget the look of joy on the mother’s face when she saw her little girl walk down the long corridor towards her. It had quite an impact on me at that early stage of my career because it made me realise that those developmental milestones are such a huge moment for parents, whether their children are in an institution or out in the community.”

The Disabilities sector is constantly evolving to meet the complex needs of some of society’s most vulnerable people and it is not only Rhonda’s passion for those she supports, but her ability to adapt to change which has allowed her to make such a difference to the lives of struggling families.

For the bulk of her career at CareSouth, Rhonda managed the Family Choices program which supported the families of children with a disability by providing respite care through trained volunteer carers.

“To see a carer have a child with such a significant disability - I’m talking can’t walk, can’t talk, has to be tube-fed, the love, care, acceptance and resilience of these carers is just incredible. I can think of one family in particular whose little girl had the perfect carer. Even when the child was

hospitalised in Sydney, the carer would travel up and relieve the mother, sit next to the young girl’s bed to give mum a break. That wasn’t part of Family Choices, she did that because she was committed to the little girl. That helped that family enormously.”

The Family Choices program no longer exists under the NDIS which was rolled out in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven in July 2017. From the beginning, Rhonda was in no doubt the NDIS had the potential to be fantastic for some people, but she was sceptical about its ability to meet the needs of all in the way it was promised, especially the complex cases she sees every day.

“Some of the people I had been working with prior to NDIS had funding for one-on-one support over a number of years and it worked extremely well for them because of their disability,” said Rhonda. “And now we’re fighting to get the funding to continue that. A group has lots of advantages for people, to develop their social skills and have a network of friends, it’s really good. But some people need one-on-one. They could rethink that. I was hoping the NDIS would be fantastic for the people I work with and families out in the community. And it is really good for some people because it’s about choice and control.

“There were people with physical disabilities like quadriplegia who, prior to the NDIS were not able to choose who bathes them, what time they go to bed. Their care was dictated by the services. Now people have choice and control over the services they receive. They are getting support they’ve never had and they’re doing really well.”

One of the most positive aspects of the NDIS, according to Rhonda, is being able to connect someone with a service quickly and know they will provide continuity and quality support. But she believes there needs to be more support co-ordination for people who are struggling to navigate the system.

“Quite often we get a phone call from someone in the community asking for help with their plan and they are usually quite distressed,” said Rhonda. “I will ask them if they have support co-ordination in their plan and often they will say no. It can be really difficult for families, especially if it’s their first plan, or an 80-year-old who doesn’t know how to use a computer but has a 60-year-old son on an NDIS plan. It’s all computerised. I’ve heard some pretty sad stories from people who don’t know what to do and they’re not using the money.

“However I know there are lots of people out there who are very happy. I also know there’s a lot of work that still needs to be done and we are doing everything we can at CareSouth to provide the level of support these families are entitled to.”

