

Yes, We Can



Margaret Langdon meets a mum with cerebral palsy whose greatest obstacle is other people's attitudes.

Like all parents of a toddler, Geni Papadimitriou is both impressed and exasperated by the independent streak her daughter Ruby exhibits. "Yes, she's a two year old. She's now discovering that she can say 'no!'" Geni laughs. A vibrant, articulate woman with a keen sense of humour, Geni lives in a weatherboard cottage in Northcote with her daughter – a gorgeous little girl with big, dark eyes and a shy but cheeky smile. On the day I visit, spring sunshine is streaming into the family room at the back of the house, and a budgie provides a chirpy soundtrack to our conversation.

When Geni became pregnant at 38 she had more things to consider than the average first-time mum. She has cerebral palsy, a condition that affects muscle tone and movement, and spends much of her time in a wheelchair. Clearly, having a baby would be a challenge for which she'd need to be well prepared.

Unfortunately, she says, many of the organisations she turned to for help, including the Department of Human Services (DHS), were

more inclined to focus on the negatives than provide the practical support needed. "Other people looked at what I couldn't do, and made assumptions about my capabilities that at times destroyed my self-belief," Geni says. "They didn't believe what I was telling them, which was 'Hey, me asking for this doesn't mean I can't do it, but your extra help will make it easier for me'. They were creating so many negative scenarios that I was starting to believe them myself."

Geni is not the only parent with a disability who has encountered these kinds of reactions. Melbourne disability-service provider Yooralla believed there was a lack of support for parents with a disability when it set up the Parents with a Disability Community Network (PWDCN) in 1996. Network co-founder and coordinator Jeanette Lee says people with a disability can be discriminated against as not being capable of parenting successfully. "Parents with a disability can be very capable and caring parents," she says. "They need to get the right information and support so they can be effective parents and full participants in the community."

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“Parents with disabilities often don’t receive that family support, and sometimes they have to experience a crisis before they can get help. They can also be afraid to ask for help in case their request is seen as proof they can’t cope. There is this attitude of ‘Well, you’re asking for help so you obviously can’t manage’, when it should be ‘What do you need to help you be a more effective parent?’ We have found that many parents with a disability have to face discrimination, a complex and often hostile child-protection and court system, and inadequate disability and service support.”

During Geni’s brief period of motherhood she has faced all these things and more, including the very real fear that Ruby could be taken away from her. She had to convince child-protection authorities she had the skills and support needed to care for her daughter. “I was really afraid, especially after she was born, that I would lose her. I had to look up to see the ground. That’s how low my self-esteem had gone. It wasn’t anybody’s fault – they thought they were protecting Ruby. But I kept saying to them, ‘She’s the most precious thing I have. If I didn’t think I was capable of looking after her I wouldn’t be looking after her.’”

Geni is quick to point out that she has plenty of support to help her care for Ruby. Yooralla Community Learning and Living Service, which provides practical support to adults with a disability, helped Geni access aids and equipment to make caring for a baby easier. These included a bassinette adapted for wheelchair access, a modified cot that attached to Geni’s bed, and an automatic front door. Yooralla has also helped Geni with therapy, independent-living services and advocacy – support that was particularly valuable when Geni had to convince authorities she was able to care for Ruby herself.

Geni has a close, loving family, and support workers who help with physical tasks. Ruby’s father participates in her care, and while he and Geni live separately, they make parenting decisions together. Ruby enjoys her extended family, which includes several half-brothers and sisters. “I am the luckiest single parent put on this earth,” says Geni. “Ruby isn’t just being raised by me. She’s being raised by my support team; she’s being raised by my family and she’s being raised by her dad. I’m not your average single mum.

“I’m also lucky in a sense that you can see my limitations, and people come up and say, ‘Hey, would you like a hand?’ There are a lot of parents out there, and single mums, who don’t get help. I believe this wholeheartedly – my disability is a gift,” she says. “It’s not a gift I would give to anybody else, and not a gift I’ve always

wanted, but it’s made me appreciate and value the things that I can do, and to know when I need to ask for help. I’ve grown into my disability, and now it’s a friend I know quite intimately.”

Geni is philosophical about her early experiences with the DHS and the fact she had to prove herself as a mother, when most of us do not. “The DHS were difficult and it was a difficult time. I know their services are needed, but they need to be inclusive and more disability-aware. However negative it was, the positives that came out of me having to struggle and prove myself actually taught me my own capabilities, and taught me that there are people out there who are willing to give you a hand, and offer their assistance and expertise. I’ve met so many lovely people, even in my worst times. I just love people, and having Ruby gives us something to talk about. Ruby breaks down a lot more barriers than I ever did.”

Geni has always loved children, but thought for practical reasons motherhood would not be part of her life. She went to university, gained a BA in youth affairs, forged a career as a youth worker, travelled and renovated her home. “I’ve always loved kids,” she says. “I’d always dream... but I didn’t think I would have the right support. I never thought I would have the right partner. I was a realist. Then it happened anyway!”

Geni started a journal while preparing for the birth of her baby. As she’s unable to write, she dictates her thoughts to her carers who write them down in a notebook. “She speaks – I write!” jokes Megan, one of the support team who has formed a close bond with Geni and Ruby. “The journal let me process things,” says Geni. “Everything I was feeling, everything I had to do, all the advice people gave me – it was somewhere I could voice all those fears and not be judged for it.”

It makes fascinating reading, and browsing through the pages I am struck by the fact that we’re all the same – but different. Everybody worries about how they will manage parenthood, and everybody faces difficulties of some sort; it’s only the details that vary. Geni agrees. “I think we all have our own limitations, we might not call them disabilities, but we all have something we’re not confident of. We’ve all got fears.”

I read aloud a brief entry from the journal written not long after Ruby was born. “Since I’ve had you home for a month – boy, what a learning curve!” it says, and Geni and I laugh, united as all parents are by memories of the amazing and terrifying world of new parenthood. I ask Geni what motherhood means to her, and her face lights up. “I’ve found my calling,” she says. “I’m not just ‘Gen in the chair’ any more. I’m ‘Ruby’s mum’.” ●

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