



Two of us

ALLY LANCASTER & CONNOR McLEOD

Connor McLeod, 14, is blind. With the help of his mother, Ally Lancaster, 43, he has campaigned for the Reserve Bank of Australia to print tactile banknotes and for text-to-speech technology on Eftpos machines.

ALLY: When the paediatrician looked at Connor, aged four months, and said, “I strongly suspect this child is blind,” I curled up in the corner of his office and howled.

Two months later, Connor’s father and I separated, and I flew solo for a while with the three kids. I started learning Braille. I spent months studying and crying, thinking, “I’m going to fail my child, because I cannot grasp this stupid code,” and then one day, it just clicked.

There have been a lot of tears shed over the years. Connor hasn’t cried for a while now. We used to cuddle up and he’d cry, and I’d cry silently. I thought I was doing the right thing by appearing to be strong.

His expectation of himself is to be like everybody else. He’s been abseiling, rock-climbing and caving since he was five. He swims like a fish. He plays the drums and the keyboard. He’s just done the Sydney-to-Wollongong cycle ride on a tandem with his dad. He’s got a great sense of humour.

I’ve always worked, so from when he was 10 months old, he was in daycare. He’s always gone to a mainstream school, and now at his secondary school he’s on an academic scholarship. At 10, after qualifying

to represent his school in cross-country [running], he was told he wasn’t allowed to because he was blind. So he approached the NSW Department of Education for the rule to be changed, and it was.

Three years ago he got fed up – that when people gave him money at Christmas, he had to ask me how much he got. He thought, “There must be some way I can figure this out for myself.” We found out that other currencies have tactile features, and that Australia was already printing tactile-featured banknotes for other countries. That was like waving a red rag to a bull for Connor. He set up a Facebook page, started a petition, and wrote to the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA). He felt this was important not only for himself, but for other people with vision loss. For that, he’s been nominated for a 2015 National Disability Award.

He also approached the Commonwealth Bank to make text-to-speech technology available on their Eftpos machines, so vision-impaired people would know how much was being removed from their account at the point of purchase.

He’s been awarded the National Braille Press’ Hands On! Award for these two

“

We found out that Australia was printing tactile-featured banknotes for other countries. That was like waving a red rag to a bull for Connor.

”

INTERVIEWS BY
ROSAMUND BURTON

projects. This award has previously gone to [writer] J.K. Rowling and [former US First Lady] Laura Bush, and he’ll be the first Australian to receive it. He’s very excited that we’re being flown to Boston and that while we’re in the US we’re going to Disneyland and Universal Studios.

He doesn’t always like that he’s different, but he accepts it, and just does his best, which is admirable. Sometimes he chucks a hissy and doesn’t want to do what he’s told, and we have words. I don’t have any different expectations of him than I do of my other two children, and nor should I. It’s my job to enable him to be the best person that he can possibly be.

CONNOR: I try to be independent and Mum supports that. She’s never wrapped me in cotton wool. She often tells me to drink a cup of concrete – in effect, harden up and toughen up.

We’re an active family. We go abseiling, caving and snow-skiing. When I’m skiing Mum is sometimes beside me, sometimes behind, saying, “Go this way, pick up pace, or STOP!” She’s sent me crashing once or twice. Once when she was trying to help me up, she fell over. I managed to get up and she couldn’t, and I was seriously ready to ski down to the bottom, dragging her along.

At Christmas 2012, some folks gave me money, and I had to ask Mum how much I had been given. I told her how annoyed I was that there was no way for the blind community to tell the denomination of bank notes. We started lobbying the RBA and put a petition on change.org that got 57,000 signatures and many comments from people in the blind community saying how they had been ripped off because they couldn’t tell the different denominations.

With the banknotes campaign, I also realised it’s not a cash-currency world any more, and there’s no speech program for electronic transactions. When I’m older, Mum’s not going to be there to say “push this button,” so I had to do something about that as well. There is no chance I could have done these things without Mum.

She gets me to do chores. I empty the dishwasher and feed the dog. If I’ve made a mess, she makes me clear it up – unless it’s like this morning’s coffee spill. She put a cup of coffee for my stepdad on the bench right where I make breakfast, and when I was reaching towards the cupboard, over it went: coffee everywhere.

Mum has a good sense of humour, and I’ve got her sense of humour as well as my dad’s and my stepdad’s. There’s a lot of joking.

Being blind does get me down. I attempt to be as similar as everybody else, but it doesn’t always work. Like, when everyone is laughing at a video and I’m “What?” because no one is explaining it. Sometimes I get nervous that I’m doing something and everyone is looking at me thinking, “What are you doing?” And I’m like, “I thought you were doing it.” “No, we stopped doing that five minutes ago.” “You never told me.”

Mum has told me that she wishes every day that I wasn’t blind. Obviously, blind is blind, but if you don’t let it stop you, what’s it stopping you from doing? Nothing. ■