Earth Matters

**Bec:** Welcome to Earth Matters. Environmental justice stories from Australia and around the world. Produced in the studios of 3CR on Wurundjeri Country in the Kulin Nation in Naarm, Melbourne. And broadcast across this continent via the Community Radio Network. I'm your host Bec Horridge.

Today is the Earth Matters World Disability Day special, with Dee Mould's insights on peer to peer support for people affected by anything, including weather extremes such as fires and floods. The show was made in Lismore, on the lands of the Widjabul people, on the Bundjalung Nation. And in Newcastle, Mulubinba, on the Awabakal Nation, and on Ngambri and Ngunnawal country in Canberra. You'll hear the chants and songs from the Newcastle Coal Port Blockade.

*(a clip of protesters chanting to the beat of drums, NO TO COAL, STOP THE SHIPS, WE SAY NO APOCALYPSE)*

**Bec:** Dee Mould, welcome to 3CR special broadcasting for World Disability Day. And everybody who's broadcasting today is disabled, including moi. And I've rubbed in some of my Voltaren this morning, so I'm not quite so sore as usual.

I've been working so hard, too hard! Because I'm just always called into trying to save the critters and have a biosphere that will exist in the future, it draws me into activity and pain with my disability. How are you going, Dee?

**Dee:** I'm going very well! I've been hiding from activism for a few months. But I've been working in a mental health drop in center, so I've been working on my own and other people's mental health, which I value in a similar way to how I value activism, yeah. Predominantly working in the flood zone.

**Bec:** The flood zone is where 3CR first found you back in 2022 post flood. We did two shows with you, Dirt Radio and Earth Matters both. We both featured you there with your amazing well, with your story of the flood.

**Dee:** Yeah. I think when we spoke, we was trying to offer people very practical, real support with their housing. And I took this role as a way of continuing support for the flood affected community. And now I still work in Woodburn and I counsel, in my own sort of way, mostly flood affected people. I'm a peer support worker. I live in the flood zone. I exist in the flood zone.

**Dee:** I've only been out of the flood zone for about a month since we spoke when I went to England.

**Bec:** What do the words health sovereignty mean to you?

**Dee:** For me, I'm currently working in mental health with flood affected people as a peer worker. And so as I very much identify as somebody with mental health conditions and a flood affected person, that puts me in that group and enables me to support sovereignty for that group of people.

And whereas I totally value the input of clinicians and all of those type fields, I think it's very important that people with health conditions and people with disabilities get support from their own community.

**Dee:** And that's what I'm currently doing. So I feel the same way about that with my physical disability. I think it's really important for people with disabilities to be able to access support from people with disabilities, because no matter how qualified somebody is. Peer support is someone who understands your journey a bit more.

Yeah, that's what I do. And that's my take on health sovereignty, disability sovereignty. We all deserve to be able to take control of our own health, mental health, physical health.

I've had a physical disability and mental health problems for most of my adult life. And I'm pig-headed enough that I have wrestled control of that stuff away from health professionals and steer it myself. So, what it is.

**Bec:** Do you think having peer to peer workers like you would minimise some of the harm that the system has been found like in reports that have come out recently that examine the effect on people of the health system?

**Dee:** Yeah, the health system can be… can do damage. I have experience, personal experience of that. For me, where I see the value of peer support so much is, I describe it as the flood zone, but basically it's the aftermath of a massive weather event that was caused by climate change.

And I was certainly turbocharged by climate change. So the people who got caught up in that and the mental health they ended up with in the aftermath of that are better able to support themselves. Because I see some very qualified people and often those people get amazing results, but often they just don't get it.

**Dee:** For me, when I sit down with someone who went through it as well, there's a bond and there's an understanding that enables safety between us. I've got an injury to my brachial plexus, spinal injury.

And it's a rarer - a spinal injury is not rare - but I very rarely come across someone with a brachial palsy, the same as mine when I do, I know they get it. And that makes me feel safe and that enables me to talk to them in a way that I would struggle to talk to a very qualified surgeon even.

I know he understands physically what's happening to me, but I've yet to be put in front of a surgeon with a paralysed arm. So he can well understand the physical effects and I value his input and I have had surgeries on it. And I've sought the care of those people, but they don't understand what's going on for me.

I'm in chronic pain, constant chronic pain. I sit with people and talk to them about that pain and they know I get it because while we're talking, I'm grimacing.

So they know I understand. I might not understand the science behind pain, but I do understand what it's like to constantly be in pain and I think I'm able to offer support around it coming from that angle. So yeah, health sovereignty.

**Bec:** Dee Mould, I know that you have bought a pedal canoe. Which I'm interested in, because I had to quit canoeing a long time ago, and I too am heading to the people's blockade of the world's largest coal port, which will have happened by the time this is broadcast. I'm hoping to meet up with you there. How have your plans been going?

**Dee:** As you said, I bought a paddle canoe and that I can't paddle, because of my paralysed arm, so you know, like all things with disability, there's a way around it. Normally those things cost a bit of money. So I have bought a pedal canoe and I'm going to pedal it out into the harbour in front of coal ships.

Yeah, I'm a little bit anxious around it, but. I just came across a paper at work that was about climate anxiety and how worrying about climate change and what's happening to the planet can affect people's mental health. I like the term pre traumatic stress. Which I love.

So reading about climate anxiety and how to treat it at work really surprised me because what the peer reviewed paper suggested was the best treatment for people suffering from, climate anxiety was to group together with other people who have climate anxiety to pretty much mobilise to take action so that they feel empowered and less anxious about it, so that they feel like they're doing something about it.

**Dee:** And me, with my activist brain, reading this stuff, it sounded very much like a call to action. Now, I don't think it was written from that angle, but it was very hard to read it not as a call to action. For me, as well, with my physical disability, when I got involved with activism, I was in a different headspace to what I am now.

But I went there, I took action, I joined a community that didn't care that I had a disability. And that empowered me to go around my disability and often forget about it. There was more important things on my mind, and I'm not sure what that means.

**Bec:** Yes, I remember you at Moores Creek. It was a decade ago when we tried to stop the Whitehaven coal miner. Yeah, I think so. But you know what? I never noticed. That only one of your arms was active. I just thought you were the most fit activist climbing up things and really putting your heart into it. Isn't that incredible? I didn't find out until about a decade later. You had to tell me.

**Dee:** And I'm no longer that fit.

 (Laughter)

**Dee:** It was a decade ago. I've aged a bit. I'm no longer that fit. I can still scramble around a bit, a little bit slow.

**Bec:** Oh, I can still crawl under.

 (More laughter)

**Dee:** Yes. And probably get up. Yeah, it was a while ago. It was a while ago. We all worked really hard and a lot of people's uniqueness was not really noticed, because we was all pulling together to challenge one of the biggest problems we face as a society. We all got pretty fierce.

**Bec:** I've been thinking deeply about activism and disability from my own context in preparation for this. And one of the wonderful things about not being able to do everything, is that you get some time to, perhaps follow your passion and follow your heart.

And there's this massive hole in the system of trying to fix problems like global heating. I cannot believe that saving the world's ecosystems and all of the services they offer us like clean air and clean water has been largely left to volunteers.

**Bec:** That is incredible, and a big economic mistake as people are realising now. But what it's meant to me is that there's always been so much that needs doing, but people who are in paid jobs with paid job descriptions don't have time to do it.

So you just have the time to follow your heart and nothing left to lose because most people aren't going to employ you anyway. You're free to be on the front line in some way and then constantly pushed. What can I do? Alright, I can't climb a rope. Or no, I can't sit in front of a computer or fix this solar system.

But what can I do? I'll do washing up with one arm. Okay. That's what I did over New Year and Christmas once there. It was a wonderful experience with (inaudible) there.

**Dee:** Absolutely with you on free and uptime. I picked up my disability, my physical disability when I was 20.

**Dee:** And exactly like you say, got plunged into a void of Intermittent employment. And that wasn't always a positive situation until I went to, I went to the Pelican first, but until I became involved with the crew of people I became involved with.

Then suddenly I wasn't judged on my physical disability or even my mental health. All my strangeness was put by, and I was judged on my contribution to the group.

And even people who wasn't really able to contribute, there was a, everyone was found... We prided ourselves on inclusion and being able to find roles for anybody. Mainstream society is not so very good at that, is it? It puts people on the rubbish heap and then complains.

**Bec:** You're listening to Earth Matters, broadcast nationally across these stolen lands via the Community Radio Network.

*(various ambient clips from protests play)*

**Bec:** Dee and I went to the blockade of the world's largest coal port at Mulubinba, Newcastle. It was a hectic few days and we didn't get a chance to talk until we were back home again. So we're back. We're rested. We're home, Dee. How are you feeling?

**Dee:** Oh, I slept well. And yeah, my daughter's still resting pretty much and we're home. Yeah, it was pretty much a success, I think.

**Bec:** The biggest obstacle for me was getting my luggage there.

**Dee:** I think a big thing for me is the way I've got so into that mindset of, "hey, I've got no problems, no barriers", so that I can do it. You know? It can be hard for me to say, "oh yeah, it was hard". Because I'm just like, "Yeah, I can do that". But there was definitely some challenges though.

**Bec:** Well, certainly the site was quite challenging for people on wheels. The event was essentially on a beach with sand and I didn't see anybody with wheels down there. That's the nature of the event though. The organisers can only do as much as they can do with the context and situation.

**Dee:** Yeah. I'm sure if somebody who was relying on a wheel device of some sort had of wanted to attend, I found the organisers really supportive. I'm sure if somebody had reached out and said I want to attend the event, anything, when you registered, there was access requirements.

I put a couple of things down, I'm sure if I'd have said that I had serious mobility issues, then that would have been, I would have been supported with that. So, I know the Rising Tide crew, they're so supportive.

They supported me. They actually provided me with a free psychologist for about probably two and a half hours, and I sat on a beanbag with them. Can you imagine any other event organisers?

Supplying you with a free good psychologist to support your mental health if you were struggling? I can't believe how well I was supported. I really honestly can't. It was amazing to see everybody pulling together and putting differences behind and just going for the common goal.

**Dee:** I ran into some personal stuff that triggered me into almost a full blown. mental health episode and I was supported through that. I don't know really where you'd get that anywhere else. I was set to leave. And no, I was supported. The Safer Spaces place sprung into action, supported me, gave me a psychologist and a beanbag.

It was so impressive. The people behind Rising Tide are seriously committed to inclusion. I know that one of the people arrested who had serious vision impairment. And they was taken through the arrest process. And again, I don't know many event organisers in any arena that would take that on.

Yeah, I was very impressed with the inclusion and the safety of the event. I hear what you say about access requirements, but I really think that if someone had reached out, they would have been accommodated. Yeah.

**Bec:** I was kind of relieved when I bumped into someone I knew who also admitted that they have trouble in swirling crowds of people.

**Dee:** Yeah.

**Bec:** And hadn't actually camped on site. And I have difficulty with that too. I found that thinking about health sovereignty, that I could use that those ideas to guide myself.

That if I didn't want to go into a crowded tent, then I didn't have to. I could find quieter spaces and there was a chill space provided for people to get away from the intensity of crowds and loads of noise and lots of fantastic music.

Talk about finding safer spaces, I found the ideal spot under the stage where it's shady so I can't get skin cancer. It's really not too many people around me, in fact nobody, where I could just do my work of monitoring the microphone and the speakers and see everybody. It was just so great.

**Dee:** Yep.

**Bec:** The under the stage hideout. The most serene and quiet space I did find was in the middle of the night.

*(Short clip plays from Bec at the blockade. You can hear the ambient sounds of the ocean in the background)*

**Bec:** Here at the night blockade. The Newcastle port blockade at 4am in the morning on Sunday. Sunday the 26th of November. *(Clip ends)*

**Dee:** Part of my PTSD is I get overwhelmed really easily. I got overwhelmed on the trip there stopping for a hamburger. And so you can imagine walking into that crowd. I did a training, I did an MVDA training for the event.

So I guess it was almost inevitable that I'd become overwhelmed eventually. And I really am so grateful to the organizers for how well they handled it and even the follow up, it was just beautiful.

I think that anybody with a disability or a health condition could be confident to engage with Rising Tide and ask for their requirements to be met, and I think they really would be. Yeah, I don't know, I think that people with disabilities can achieve anything they want to do.

**Bec:** We talked before about finding a role in these volunteer movements. There are so many roles. And in that park there, just for three days, we create a complete society.

And just the role of chatting to people while they're having tea, quite a lot of people are there on their own, or they're there with a group of people they don't know very well. That's a role, just chatting.

**Dee:** And how much of an asset was that accessible unisex toilet as well? That really was a godsend. Yeah. There was the regular toilets and showers, but a bit closer to the site was an accessible toilet. And it was a really nice clean facility, so I made use of that a lot.

**Bec:** I don't know how the deaf people would go at that event. I feel very, just very separate from the deaf community, and I've been realising that recently, that I don't have any connection with the deaf community.

**Dee:** As we talk, a role is... I think I've been looking for a bit of a new role. I'm feeling a bit old in the tooth for what I've been doing.

*(Dee laughs)*

And maybe supporting inclusivity, because it's what I do for paid work. So maybe I could start looking at some of the bigger events and try and work with removing some barriers for people so they can participate.

And I noticed some feedback on the websites and negative feedback about exploiting people with disabilities, which I find really offensive. I think that people with disabilities, of all sorts of disabilities, are able to make their own minds up and they're not being exploited, they're being included.

And I think people should be supported to participate if they want. I think they can achieve anything. I've done pretty well. I've got a serious physical disability. And basically a mental injury and I do all right with support. So I've been preparing for that event for a number of months, probably two months, three months.

**Dee:** I bought a pedal kayak, which worked really well. That was a way of getting around my disability, because it's very hard for me to paddle with one hand. At the last event I had an electric outboard, this event was longer, it went overnight, so I didn't want to use an electric outboard, so I went with the pedals.

But unfortunately the steering modification didn't work very well, and I launched on the first day, and it wasn't successful, I went round in a circle and crashed.

So I wasn't able to, that was very frustrating for me. To do that much preparation and financial outlay and for it to fail last minute was disappointing. But again, with the support of the organisation, I managed to still hitch rides, and I found myself marooned on a pontoon in the shipping channel! Which wasn't... I wanted to be really in the thick of it, with everyone else in a kayak.

That's what I'd planned. I was still in the thick of it, but I wasn't in the big massive kayaks, which is where I wanted to be. But I still managed to disrupt shipping I feel.

**Dee:** And (also at one point) I felt I'd failed, and I wasn't able to partake, and I had quite a mental low. There was some stuff as well that pushed me into a bit of an episode and Rising Tide supported me. Picked me up and provided me with basically, mental health support.

Mental health is one of the areas where you get the least support. If I turn up at an event displaying my paralysed arm in a sling, I'll get help or support. But my mental health often just gets me labeled as hard to get on with and excluded. To be included and to feel that was understood was totally brilliant.

I'd really like to see more people with disabilities getting involved and being supported. Not just getting involved and struggling, doing it hard. Let's show the world that people with disabilities can take part in the environmental movement, that people with disabilities care about the environment and let's show what we can do. That's what I'd like to see.

**Bec:** Right on. Thanks so much Dee, for again talking with Earth Matters. And for embarking on this journey, you've encouraged me to go and I'm glad that I did.

**Dee:** I think that the power lies in mass disruptive action. I've been involved with lots of actions that have been small groups of people.

But I think if you put 3000 people behind the message, that's really so powerful. And I'd like to see everyone included in that. People with disabilities. Older people, younger people, everybody, a whole cross section of the community.

**Bec:** You've been listening to Earth Matters. If you'd like to get in touch with the Earth Matters team, you can email us at Earthmatters3cr@gmail.Com. Or, visit our Facebook page on Earth Matters, 3CR Radio. You can find this and all Earth Matters podcasts at 3cr. org. au forward slash Earth Matters. If you're already listening via a podcast service, why not subscribe?

Earth Matters thanks the Community Broadcasting Network for their generous financial contribution. Look out for more From the Earth Matters next week. I'm Bec Horridge.

*(a clip of protesters chanting to the beat of drums, "NO TO COAL, STOP THE SHIPS, WE SAY NO APOCALYPSE", followed by another ambient clip of horn instruments and people's voices)*

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