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Most of us are now well aware of the benefits of reading allowed to small children.

The research is in.

Reading books to kids stimulates the hyperactive language centres in their brains, accelerates their communication skills, social skills and literacy skills, and just putting aside all that neuroscience for a moment.

It's also a total joy, both for the kid and for the reader, because you catch the kid at that really lovely moment, that perfect moment, when they've had their dinner, they've been hosed down and put in their jammies, and they're a bit sleepy and ready for bed.

But there's not always an adult around to give a child their bedtime story.

Some years ago, Roman Sheehan met some children going into foster care, and she realised that they will often arrive into the home without ever having enjoyed that lovely, magical interlude, getting lost in the telling of a story from a book.

Roman Sheehan is a former nurse and midwife, and she became aware of the situation of homeless kids when she was working in a hospital.

She became friends with a foster carer,

and she realised that there are so many kids who miss out on being read to.

And so she set up the Pajama Foundation,

which trains thousands of volunteers to simply read stories allowed to children in care.

Hi, Roman. Hi.

What was your favourite bedtime story as a little kid?

Well, I am a big fan of A.A. Miln.

As am I.

And my nighttime routine was our dad used to come and tuck us in,

and he used to say,

um-zine, um-zine, and he would tuck in the bedsheets really, really tight.

And then my favourite childhood memory is him reading me and my sister the poem,

Alexander Beatle.

I had a little Beatle Alexander was his name.

He lived in a matchbox, and I called him just the same.

And Nanny let my Beatle out?

And Beatle ran away.

Yes, it's a tragedy, but Beatle, I don't want to spoil or alert,

Beatle comes back in the end, though it doesn't Beatle.

And Beatle felt guilty for running away.

That's right.

Um, and Nanny said she was sorry, and...

She said she didn't mean it, and I never said she did.

Oh, that's a lovely story.

I was read that as a kid by my dad,

and I've read that endlessly,

that in one of all those other poems from when we were very young,

and now we are six, to my kids as well.

And you had plenty of that as a kid.

Yeah, I did.

And that was, I have...

I've had the absolute on-own pleasure of having a beautiful childhood in the 80s and a brother and a sister,

and a very happy and secure and loving environment.

And that's something that I think is a basic human right.

And there are some children in our community that have had a rocky start, and I think it's up to people like myself,

to have had a good childhood to contribute.

What feeling did those bedtime stories give you,

tucked in tightly under the sheets like that?

Well, it's just love and security and routine, and every night being the same.

That's really important for the growing brain.

Children who have experienced trauma,

you know, trauma really impedes brain development.

So education was easy for me.

Home life was easy and very non-stressful.

You read to your own kids as well.

So I think you find that when you do the reading,

it actually soothes a few jagged nerves,

because now they're nicknamed for that period

when you get kids ready for this called arsenic hour by and large, isn't it?

When you've got to get them fed,

you've got to get rid of the cone of refuse of food

that's fallen off the high chair after dinner and get them clean.

But then they enter that kind of lovely, sleepy, dozy mode.

And that's when, I think you all get a moment of peace from that, don't you?

100%. Yeah, 100%.

And it's such a beautiful time.

It's such a bonding time.

And it really will set you up.

It's calming. It's calming. It's mindfulness.

And it's really, really special.

But books are a big part of the childhood generally for you?

Yes. I can remember our routine was Friday night with library and fish and chips.

And I don't know if it was probably me,

because I tend to muddle my words.

We used to say Friday night was bribery and chips.

So you came then all your young life

to really assess your books and reading with pleasure and comfort and security and discovery as well?

Absolutely. And then when I had my own children,
one of my friends was a primary school teacher,
and she gave me books and said,
read, read, read, read, read.
And so that's what I did with my children from newborn babies.
And I loved it.
I got to see how they loved it.
And then when they went to school for the first time,
I saw how they learned to read almost overnight,
almost like magic.
I didn't try and teach them to read books,
but that's how children learn to read
by having books read aloud to them.
They sat with you, followed the words on the page,
and then when it came time to get phonics or whatever it was
that was going to teach them how to read,
they were able to go on with it very quickly then.
Absolutely. And Mem Fox,
one of our beautiful children authors here in Australia,
says that every child should have a thousand books
read aloud to them before they learn to read themselves.
The language in books is different from our oral language.
You can tell when a child has been read to
because of their vocabulary.
Kids won't let you read a thousand books.
They want the same books every night, though.
That's the thing.
Maybe the same book a thousand times might work.
It does count.
Right. It does count.
So where did you grow up, Roman?
I was born in Auckland in New Zealand.
Then when I was two, we went to Fiji for two years,
and I have some childhood memories of living in Fiji as well.
Came back to Auckland when I was four,
and then we came to Australia to live when I was 11.
What kind of lessons did you get while you were a kid in Fiji?
Were there much greater disparities in income?
Yes, there was.
And we were in Fiji in the late 60s,
and there weren't many expats in Fiji at the time.
And I got to play with a lot of the local children.
As a matter of fact,
one of my memories that I can remember quite clearly

is that a young Fijian girl stole one of my dolls,
and I wanted to ring the police.
And Mum explained to me that I had lots of toys
and she didn't actually have any toys
and that she could keep my doll.
Sometimes it's early childhood memories
that influence what you do later on in life.
So the family moved to Brisbane and you went to school there.
Were you good at school? Were you a natural student?
I would say I was very average.
Yeah, I was a very average...
Well, maybe I'm discrediting myself.
Maybe a little bit above average.
When I went nursing, that was kind of my...
I'd always wanted to be a nurse.
I did very well academically at nursing.
Why did you want to be a nurse?
I wanted to either be a nurse or a policewoman.
And I chose nursing.
Both my grandparents were nurses.
I love people.
And I wanted to do something that was practical,
that you could move around lots.
It would be really interesting.
And I really...
Nurse for 21 years and absolutely loved it.
Do you ever wonder what would have happened
if you'd gone into the police force instead?
Yeah, interesting, isn't it?
I wonder if I had gone into the police force,
I would have ended up in child protection.
And knowing myself,
I'm pretty sure that I probably could have done that.
So where did you begin your training as a nurse?
I trained at the Royal Brisbane Hospital.
I'm in my 50s, and so I was hospital trained.
And we did seven weeks of P&C in the School of Nursing.
And then we were let loose out onto the wards
as a 17-year-old.
But we were very well protected.
You'd have a junior nurse and a senior nurse
and a registered nurse,
and you'd all share the same patients.
It was a wonderful way to do your training.

And you learned a lot.
So by the time I think everyone got to the end of the first year,
you kind of knew if this is what you were cut out for or not.
After I did my nursing training, which was three years,
you had to do a year postgraduate
before you could start your mid-buffery training.
And it was the Royal Women's Hospital.
And that was a year training.
And it was just divine. I loved it.
I loved the anatomy and physiology of mid-buffery.
And to see the beginning of life is such a pleasure.
I've seen thousands of babies being born,
and often I'd be crying along with the parents.
It was a very, very special profession.
Experienced midwives are amazing to watch in action.
They have all that knowledge and that experience.
And as the parent for the first time coming around you,
this is all astonishing what's going on and terrifying.
Women are making sounds that you'd normally make you associate
with someone dying, actually.
In fact, they're actually just giving birth.
And an experienced midwife has seen it thousands of times before.
To be honest, I have to say,
I regarded like the experienced midwives
as kind of like these elite priestesses
who have all this secret knowledge about the world.
Yeah, when I did my midwifery training,
which is in the early 90s,
there was midwives there that had been a midwife for 40 years.
They could just know things that were going to happen,
about to happen.
You get really good at reading people and patterns.
Yeah, amazing.
I think sometimes a midwife should compile a book
on the things women say when they're going into transition.
Things they yell at their husbands that moment of transition.
It's colourful.
It really is.
And sometimes if you'd come into a change of shift
and you'd come on and meet a person for the first time,
and they might be transitioning or close to delivering,
and so they're in a very wild and fragile state.
And then after the baby's born,
it's almost like you got to meet them for the first time.

Oh, hello.
So this is what you're really like.
So there you are in the hospital.
You're doing your dream job,
and you're loving the nature of your work.
It's kind of what you always wanted to do.
Tell me how you started encountering straight children
in the hospital.
Yeah, well, when I was doing my nursing training,
I worked a couple of times in the children's hospital,
and I incidentally nursed some foster children.
There was one little guy.
His name was Henry, and he lived in the hospital,
and he was two at the time.
He was born with incomplete airway,
and so he had a tracheostomy,
which is the hole in your neck that he had to breathe through
for the first two years of his life.
And he had to have several operations
where they had to operate on his trachea,
which is his windpipe, as he grew.
So he literally lived in the ear, nose, and throat ward,
and he had his own room.
He had all these beautiful clothes that were bought for him
by all the nurses.
He had a little bike.
He used to ride around his little push bike around the ward
when all the other children were having their tonsils out.
And he was a foster child,
so that was my first experience of coming in contact.
So he was living in the hospital?
At that stage, this is in the 80s,
he had his health concerns
where he had to have daily attention to his airway.
And there was no parent or guardian with him at the time?
Not at that stage,
but he ended up going home to a family years later,
so I found out.
Had you had any contact with kids in care up to that point?
When I was doing my training again,
I can remember working in casualty.
And we had a young boy, he was 13,
and he was, I think he had run away from his foster care placement
and was living on the street.

And I can remember talking to him all of 13
and not being able to get my head around the fact
that he lived on the street.
And when I said to him,
but where do you sleep?
I can remember him saying that he slept up a tree.
I don't know how long he was doing that for,
but I remember thinking to myself,
wow, how could you possibly sleep up a tree?
All these fleeting experiences, I think,
over my nursing career,
and then when my children went to primary school,
I got to have another look into the foster care system.
Yeah.

I suppose we can know,
we can sort of hear that there are homeless children
living in extreme circumstances like that.
But it's one other thing to meet a kid who's going through that.
Even today, I think a lot of our homelessness is hidden.
You know, there's a lot of it that you just don't know,
that you don't know people's circumstances.
Like I say, you met your husband, you built your own family.
How did you and your husband meet?
We're very cheesy.
We actually went to school together.
How old were you when you met each other?
I was 15 and he was 17,
so we've known each other for a very long time.
Once you had kids, did you feel confident
you could handle motherhood after being a nurse and midwife
all those years?
Yeah, I think nothing really prepares you
for being a first-time mum.
I was probably presumptuously confident
being a midwife, working in the nursery
and looking after six babies.
I thought, how hard can it be to look after one?
But it's very different when it's your own child
and you worry about your own children,
which was something that was unexpected for me.
How hard could it be, you said?
Well, it can be quite hard actually, can't it?
What sort of advice did you get from your family
and friends about reading to your kids?

Yeah, I think it was one of my teaching friends
that gave me books and said,
read, read, read, read, read.
I can remember I went back nursing
when my daughter was four months old
on the weekend and my husband looked after
my little, she was six months old.
And he thought I was a little bit strange
when I told him he had to read to a newborn baby.
But then when my daughter was setting up,
I arrived home from work
for him to meet me in the driveway
and say, look what I have taught Kate.
And I came upstairs.
He handed her a little board book
and she held it up the right way.
And that's the concept of our print,
holding books the correct way
and then turning the pages.
And he said, Kate, show me the tiger.
So she held up the book the correct way,
turned three or four pages,
found the tiger and went,
so my husband thought he was an absolute genius
teaching six month old.
You know, who can't really,
your babies can't speak,
but they can certainly comprehend.
Like I mentioned at the start,
we know how important it is.
There's all the science that's been done,
neuroscience done on the importance of reading
aloud to kids when they're little.
What more can you tell me about that?
So literacy equates to your quality of life.
The more literate you are,
the happier you are,
the healthier you are.
And obviously literacy really equates
to your employment as well.
So I think literacy is fundamentally important
and it starts at an early age.
So your oldest daughter Kate went to school.
Tell me about this little girl that she met

when she started school.
Yes, my child went to school
in the northern suburbs of Brisbane.
There was a child that was in foster care
that was in the same year as my daughter.
And we invited this young lady
to Kate's grade four birthday party.
Must have been her 10th birthday party
and it was her first birthday party
that she'd ever been invited to.
Yet she'd been at the school since prep.
So what happened on the day of the birthday?
Her foster mum didn't drive
and she'd caught two buses
to bring this young lady
to my daughter's birthday party
as well as she had to drag along
all the other foster kids that were in the home
and obviously I quickly got my husband
to drive them back home.
And this young lady kept coming up to me
throughout the birthday party to say
thank you so much for inviting me
and is there anything that I can do to help?
So she really touched me
and I had a lot to do with her
for over the next few years.
How about the foster mum?
You mentioned there she had a bunch of kids
she had to bring with her to this party
because she couldn't leave them alone at home presumably.
What was her story? What did you find out about her?
She was amazing
and one of the reasons I started the Pajama Foundation
because I was really inspired by her
she had been a carer for 35 years at that stage
and she had had more than 100 kids through her home
and I was blown away by
her absolute
contribution.
I think foster carers are the unsung hero.
Children that come into care
have been traumatised
and they need a lot of love and intention

and there's these magnificent people out in the community
that literally open their hearts
and their homes to vulnerable kids
and take care of them and I think they're extraordinary.
Now I caught up with her last October.
53 years she's been a foster carer.
53 years and she still has a house full of children.
I mean who does that?
She's never been on a holiday.
She doesn't spend any money on herself
yet she dedicates her life work
not that foster carers are paid.
I mean they receive an allowance
but they're essentially volunteers.
I just don't think they're praised
or acknowledged enough.
So after that you started visiting this carer
quite a bit more.
Did you have babies in her care?
No.
One day when I was visiting her
an 18 month old baby boy
had just arrived in foster care
and he had arrived with nothing
and when I saw him
he had an adult t-shirt on and an appy.
A little baby with an adult t-shirt on?
Well he had arrived with no clothes
and she hadn't had a young person for a long time
and so she had no equipment or clothing
and she was about to go shopping
and I said before you go and get anything
a four year old son has finished
with all his baby products
and so I filled my car
with protocols and prams
and high chairs and clothes
and books and toys
and took them around to her
and she was so grateful that she wanted to pay me.
Of course I didn't let her
but she wrote me a very beautiful
handwritten note to thank me
and looking into this

the 18 month old baby boy
who was very unwell
with a dreadful cold
and she was asking my advice
because she knew I was a nurse
I thought this is crazy
that this happens in my suburb.
Looking into his big brown eyes
I thought what gift can I give him right now
and my experience of my own kids
was the gift of reading
and the love of learning
and Alexander Beedle.
So if I can get him to love reading
to love learning
no matter if he moves foster care
placements, if he goes back to his
biological family, if he loves reading
then that has to play
a difference in his future.
So is this the moment
when you got the idea for the Pajama Foundation?
Correct.
When you saw this little sick baby
in an adult t-shirt
in foster care?
It was a yellow t-shirt
I'll never forget him.
He'd be in his early 20s now.
The last time I heard from him
or about him
he was 12 and he loved reading.
So I hope that
that we've had some impact
on his little life.
How did you make the connection between
what a kid like that needs
and reading, setting up a reading program?
Because it was my experience
it was my children's experience
and the statistics around children
in foster care is that
they haven't been immersed with early literacy
92% of children in care

are below the average reading level at age 7
75% of children
in out of home care won't finish grade 12
and it just makes sense
that empowering kids with education
the earlier the better
will have some positive impact
on their life moving forward.
Did that play a role in this,
the memory of that feeling?
Absolutely.
How can you contribute to an 80 month old baby?
You can.
It's one child at a time,
one book at a time.
So I formed the pajama foundation
and I knew that I couldn't read
a thousand books to all the children myself
so I went into the local newspaper
and I said calling for volunteers
to read books allowed to children
and I said calling for volunteers
to read books allowed to children
and I was inundated
and still have been 18 years later
inundated by beautiful volunteers
that share in my vision
and want to help out and contribute.
What kind of response were you talking about?
One local newspaper
in the northern suburbs of Brisbane
and I got 50 pajama angels
that I then trained.
Obviously all our volunteers
are interviewed, screened,
trained, have
working with children check
and they're called pajama angels
and one pajama angel
is matched up with one child in care
whom they visit
in their foster home
supervised by the foster carer
once a week so one kid has

their very special person.
And that person stays with them
even if they transfer to another home?
My volunteers are amazing
and they do stay with the children
and my Sunshine Coast volunteer
of the year has been a pajama angel
with the same young man for 15 years.
So can you imagine
the relationship that they have formed
is really significant?
August is a beautiful time for me
because I go around to every area
they were operating in
and we're cans down to the Gold Coast
Sydney and Melbourne.
We mentor 1,200 children every week
just over 1,200 kids
and we try and keep it one on one
because that's where the magic happens
and all children love
and serve attention
and they have their very own angel.
So sometimes it's not possible
and one angel might mentor
a couple of children
and we read books aloud
we play all those wonderful childhood games
and there's so much learning around games
help with homework
do craft, help with cooking
we watch them on the trampoline
one of my 70 year old pajama angels
was doing the times table
to rap music.
Absolutely, if that relationship
an important factor here.
Absolutely, 100%.
So research tells us
that a child who
or any children
needs one significant person in their life
that can really help them
get through a traumatic childhood.

Kids often have issues of trust
when they're in these situations
and if you show up week after week
every all the time
over a period of years
100%.

So one of our prerequisites
of being a pajama angel
is that we want you to volunteer
for at least 12 months.

These children have a lot of people
coming and going in their lives
but we're very fortunate
that a lot of our angels
our average length of volunteering
is 3.5 years

but we've got 5, 10, 15
and even 18 years

longevity of our pajama angels

Yeah, on the

3rd of February 2005

we read to a little girl

called Natasha

she was about 6

she came to the door

took one look at her pajama angel

and went and hid under the bed

the pajama angel sat on the floor

and read to 2 feet

sticking out of the bed

and that's how we started

She came out of the bed eventually after some weeks

or something like that

It's not sustainable isn't it?

But yeah, we attract

really beautiful happy people

that want to

give back to the community

their common theme.

What are the reading levels

of kids in care

like typically a problem?

I think you could safely say that

every child, well most children

would be a couple of years behind their peers
So these kids aren't like your daughter
who was kind of ready to just
bolt out out of the blocks
when she went to school. The kids are starting
from a distinct disadvantage because they haven't been read to
That's right and when I started
18 years ago there was 21,000 children
in foster care in Australia
now there's close to 48,000
So the number of children in foster care
has more than doubled
foster carers have a lot of children
they don't just have one foster kid
they have several
and so we added extra
and we're a bonus in the home
and we give the children
very special attention
and it's very interesting because all the children
will say
to the pajama angel
how much do you get paid to do this?
And they are
quite delighted when they know that
they're volunteer
They ask that quite commonly do they? The kids will say to the
How much do you get paid to do this?
And so they
must feel valued and special
when they know that the volunteer isn't
paid and the second
question they ask is are you going to come
back next week?
I have some wonderful
wonderful volunteers
that
contribute to the lives of vulnerable kids
but in saying that
they get more out of
the experience than what
the children do because
really to give is to receive
if you want to make yourself happy

then you make other people happy
I was with some volunteers on the weekend
and they were saying
she pulls up at the front
and she can hear the children
delightfully squealing
and the house going
Susie's here, Susie's here, Susie's here
so she said when I walk in the house
I've automatically got a smile on my face
podcast
broadcast
this is Conversations
with Richard Feidler
hear more conversations
anytime
on the ABC Listen app
it's often said that
kids who
have these backgrounds in care
they can respond in two ways from the
instability of their home life
they can either act up in the antisocial
which is a kind of form of defence
or they can go the other way
and try and be super charming
they think they're super sweet and charming
they'll be guile the adults to stay in their lives
do you find that's the case?
yeah absolutely it's probably gay
and look you know the kids have to learn
about relationship
and you have to build up trust of the child
and you have to do fun things
when you turn up so our pajama angels
turn up with books, puzzles, games
craft
and some of the kids just really really
will resonate with playing games
you think that you're going to turn up to the house
and this child is going to look at you
and say please read me a book
then you might be seriously misled
that you need to build up a relationship

and a trust and we follow the interests
of the child as well
and the interest of the kids is
you know it's still quite similar to what it always has been
like it could be trains
it could be dinosaurs
and blue is pretty popular at the moment as well
so we follow the interest level
of the child and we really are led
by what they're interested in
and then we slowly
navigate them around to
the number of books we can read aloud to them
you were talking about a thousand books
being read to a child it sounds like the focus was initially
on preschool kids to begin with
when did you realise you had to sort of
broaden your reach beyond that
yeah after I set up my program
we get referrals from the agency
and the department of child safety
and I've got a referral
for a child that was in grade 7
that had a reading level of grade 2
and would we help
and so we actually read to all ages
and we've just developed
a teenage program as well
teen life skill program and for the kids that are
in that program and we're doing lots of fun things
with them like a barista course
and flower decorations
sewing classes and to try
and keep them engaged with their pajama angel
and in their education
one young lady who was
18 when she came into foster care
she was in a sibling group of 13 kids
they all were in care
her name was Grace and she had
a pajama angel when she was 8
and her pajama angel Barb
stayed with her for 10 years
before she finished school and it was

18 so
when children enter care they lose
their contact
with their extended family as well
and Barb played a very great role
as a grandmother figure
and they're still in contact today
and actually I just found out talking to Grace
just recently that she's
going to move in with Barb for
a little while as well and Grace is now
nearly 22 and she has
her own child and she works
full time she is a resilient
amazing beautiful young lady
I won't
take all the credit for her great
future but she was in a beautiful
foster care placement as well
but you know I think we've broken the cycle
there
everyone as a team she reads
books aloud to her little toddler
what amazes me is
how resilient some of the children
are and how resilient
human beings can be
who are these people who typically
volunteer for this role as
pajama angels? Yeah so they're
90% female we tend to
resonate with females
75% have higher education
than grade 12 and about
75% would work full time
or part time so
fabulous role models for these
children we lift the gaze
of these kids because they're associated
with engineers
and firemen and
teachers and librarians
and their eyes
are open to all the different careers

that you can
be and you know there is
a saying that is you can't
be what you can't see I think we lift
the gaze of these beautiful kids
and that they can see a future
for themselves.
Kids are so delightful they're hard
work yes but they are so delightful when they're
little they're so delightful what effect
can it have on the volunteers
lives having a little kid
pinging around their lives once more?
Oh beautiful really really beautiful
and our pajama angels do become
quite attached to the kids and
then they get to meet the
pajama angels family
and the pajama angels dog
and so it's a wrap around
effect really that these
children have a lot of positive people
in their lives. To volunteers
sometimes expect the kids
to be grateful and get hurt if the kids
aren't grateful for what
or not are apparently grateful for whatever
reason. Look I think we train
our volunteers very
realistically to build up
a relationship with their child can take
a good couple of months
you know I think there's myths about
the foster care system that a child enters
foster care and there they live happily
about after and that a child should be
grateful because they're placed with a new
loving family but you know it's a tough
life it's hard and
the lives of these kids can
be tricky if you don't know
or have a relationship with your biological
parents. Foster kids
you know like Grace always feel

like they don't quite fit into normal society I mean Grace tells the story that when she was at school the role was accidentally projected on the wall and she had a dot beside her name which meant that she was a kid in care. It was an accident that the role went up she was probably the only person that saw that the dot was there. She saw that the dot was there. She did when you come from a broken family and even adopted children you never quite feel like you 100% fit in and I think that is a weight that these children will carry with them. Is there a problem sometimes when the kids obviously attach themselves to this lovely volunteer who's coming around all the time to some of these parents feel you serped in some ways and do you know how to deal with that situation? Well we deal with the foster parents and the foster parents are very grateful for the support. They're at the front line of the situation. Yeah of course and that's who we deal with so we don't we don't tend to deal with the biological parents and with some children and out of home care they have contact with the parents and some don't. There's no one child that is the same really in this sector but there's a very strong message to these children and is that they are special and that they are valued by society. You tell the story of a little boy who came to your organisation it was three years old called Charlie tell me a bit about his story.

Charlie's one of my faves.
He has a special place in my heart.
He was born at 27 weeks
premature.
His family were unable to care for him.
He needed to be on oxygen
for the first 12 months of his life
and he had to be doctor's appointments
from being so premature
and so ended up staying with his
midwife who became his foster carer.
He got referred to our program when he was
three years old and he
I heard from Rene
his pajama angel how gorgeous he was
and I thought she was exaggerating
until I got to meet him and he was
the most gorgeous little kid
charismatic, funny
full of life.
Rene was his pajama angel
for eight years.
He influenced her to go teaching
and become a school teacher.
She used to read books a lot to him
and he used to hang upside down on the monkey bars
in the backyard while she read to him.
The perfect greedy position
of an ancient eastern mystics
going back thousands of years.
So while he was hanging upside down
when he needed to see the picture
she had to turn the book upside down
but they had a beautiful relationship
she stayed with him for eight years
until she had her first child
and then she had to
stop being his pajama angel
but she called his first child Charlie
after him and when he was
five he was the ring bearer
in her bridal party.
He had two other pajama angels
throughout his teenage years

he finished grade 12
and the only person in his family
to complete a schooling
and he went to
university last year.
He has a very special place in my heart
he's now 19
he's probably your size if not bigger
he is
a beautiful young man
and I can't wait to see what he does
with his future.
You mentioned that the very large majority
of your volunteers are women
why do you think you haven't had more male volunteers?
I think males
probably are reluctant
and would volunteer
in maybe a sporting capacity
or something
along those lines
you know there is child protection
so maybe there is some hesitancy
around being a male
I think there are a lot of men
afraid of being accused of taking an unseemly interest
or something like that I think that does happen
it's a shame. Yeah it is a shame
we have 10% of our volunteers are male
we've got
lots of different professions
once again
engineers to medical researchers
to
firemen we had a fireman
up in Mackay who was a pyjama angel
did he bring his truck? He bought the fire truck
around to the foster home
what effect did that have when you caught fire
I'm not a kid anymore
I'm still interested in fire trucks
it's beautiful
you can't beat a fire truck
I have a big Christmas party every year

and Santa arrives in a fire truck
I think that's my favourite moment of the year
and the look on the children's faces
is absolutely delightful
and they see this fireman who does this
wonderful job who's brave
who saves people's houses, people's lives
property all that sort of thing
what a wonderful role model
for young boys
and a research tells us that the most important
person to read books allowed to
a boy is a man
it has the most impact
men tend to read
different books
in material than what a female would
I got all the bush poetry from my dad
when I was growing up, he gave me Henry Lawson
and Banjo Patterson and everything else
I got that from my dad
I think I would have gotten that from my mum
didn't really interest her but I got that from my dad
we've actually had quite a few pyjama angels
that have introduced poetry
and it's been really successful with the kids
they've loved that as well
about the engineering student
called Pete who became one of your volunteers
he was one of my original volunteers
and at the time he was called pyjama Pete
amazing young man
19 he was at the time
he got him reading after 6 months
first of all he wouldn't sit still
and listen to one book
then after 6 months he could listen
to 6 books and then after that he wouldn't
leave home with his favourite book in his hand
which then was a 3 Billy Goats
graph and I don't think
he had a car at the time but he used
to catch the bus and I think
at the end of their session they used to have

a running race down to the bus stop
so pyjama Pete has gone on
he would be well into his 30s now
and he's gone on to a successful
career and his own children
which I am sure he would read books a lot too
from a very early age
so 20 years ago you probably knew
almost nothing about the foster care system
now you probably know just about
as much as anyone does in Australia about
the foster care system
you said there are quite a few myths
in the public mind about that system
some of those myths and what's the truth as you've seen it
there's no question
this is a tough sector
there is multiple children
and the numbers of children have
doubled I have met
thousands of foster carers
and I have been nothing short
of impressed by what they do
from the load that they carry
from their motivation
for caring from
what they have to tackle every day
I think that there needs
to be organisations
like myself that can contribute
in some small way
I think that working in child protection
is really hard as well
everyone wants the best outcome for children
and
the system might not be perfect
but children that are really well cared for
in this sector
unfortunately
the bad stories always make the press
people like to, everyone's got an opinion
but they might not know
what this sector is about
and about all the good people

that are in the sector
every once in a while
I'll talk to a foster carer who is heroically kind
and people will want to know
what compels them to do it
how is it that they do what they do
do you have an answer for that
I think they want to give back to the community
that they might have had some
their parents might have been foster carers
that they have come across
a foster child
they might have been a teacher
at the school
they might have been a midwife
that's looked after a little baby like Charlie
everyone's motivation
is slightly different but
they are very brave
they do open their hearts
and their homes
they get their hearts broken
I think they're extraordinary people
and that they deserve our praise
and our assistance
and our acknowledgement and our thanks
in 2009 you were the
Queensland Australian of the year
and you would have done a lot of travelling
you would have met a whole lot of people all over the place
what do you remember of that year
and the things you found out
by being in that role for that year
that you might not have known beforehand
this organisation has taken me
all over Australia
over the years I've spoken
everywhere from rotary groups
to classrooms to
I've been to the lodge
so Prime Minister
I often speak at conferences
do you feel comfortable
sitting around those tables

and if you do how do you make yourself
feel comfortable sitting at the tables
of such people
see this is not about me
I'm not talking on behalf of myself
I'm talking on behalf of Charlie
when you
put that in perspective
then it's easy
I'm also talking about the Pajama Foundation
that they invented
and so that's easy and that's my passion
and you know it's kind of funny how
my life has ended up in this direction
my mother has a favourite
story when I was in grade one
I was the only person in the classroom
that hadn't done a morning talk
I was flying under the radar until I got
caught out by my teacher
I lined up all my dolls and teddy bears
in my room and practiced talking in front of them
and now my mum likes it
Ladies and gentlemen
I've called you here today
that kind of thing
Welcome to my TED Talk
I've done a TED Talk
I've done a short course at Harvard
you know my life is
incredibly rich
but what grounds me
and who I'm talking to on behalf of
which makes it easy is the Charlie's of the world
and the graces of the world
and talking on bare behalf
There is another way to look at your organisation
which is a long standing two decades long
and I think it's a great
experience to make it permissible
to wear pyjamas to work
now you have this once a year
and encourage people to wear pyjamas to work
as a fundraising and awareness exercise

I think this is tremendous
I think COVID pushed things along quite a bit
You did well over COVID
Yeah like as long as the pyjamas are securely fastened
I think that would be a fine thing
if we wore pyjamas to work all the time
How about you?
Yeah absolutely so once a year
actually the last time I was in the ABC studio
I was
wearing my pyjamas so I feel rather
underdressed today
but there's nothing more equalising
than everyone in their pyjamas
My goal is to have everyone in Australia
on National Pyjama Day
in July wearing their pyjamas to school
or work for the day
Sensational how fantastic to speak with you Bronwyn
Thank you so much
My absolute pleasure thank you for having me
You've been listening to a podcast
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please go to the website
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