



## Two of Us

By Greg Bearup

Reprinted with permission, from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2006

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**Damien Jones**, 36, and **Nick Hogan**, 30, have been mates for 18 years and are flatmates in Balmain, in Sydney's inner west. Damien works for an agency that places people with disabilities in employment Nick, who has Down syndrome, works in a fruit market.

**DAMIEN:** In my first year of university in Melbourne I was doing what most other students were doing: drinking a lot of beer, partying, chasing girls and not going to lectures. In the afternoon my mates and I would kick around a soccer ball in a park in Prahran. One day Nick, who was 11 or 12, joined in our game - we had no choice because he pinched our ball.

Nick and I became mates in the park and I would look out for him and make sure the other kids didn't leave him out. I was going through my punk stage at the time and had an orange mohawk. I think his parents, who are both 'suits', had me checked out - I must have passed the test because a few weeks later they asked if I could babysit Nick after school.

I came to dig Nick very quickly. It was like Zen time, everything was for the moment, whether it was playing soccer, wrestling or watching *Star Wars* for the 150th time. Nick has this great love of life which I really admire, a great optimism. I had come from a pretty dysfunctional family and I think it gave some structure to my life and gave me a sense of responsibility to be there for him.

That was 18 years ago and he has been part of my life ever since. I have had several stints caring for Nick as his parents have moved around the country. A couple of years ago his mum got a big job offer to move to New Zealand and his parents asked if my girlfriend and I would move from Melbourne to Sydney to be flatmates with Nick while they were away, which we did. It was an easy decision because he is a great flatmate.

When he turned 18 we got him a punk haircut and took him out clubbing in Melbourne. Nick was a hit with all the girls, and my mates wanted to take him out all the time because he broke down barriers and helped them meet girls.

He is the king at the local pub here in Balmain and is a bit of a Casanova - he knows he can always get away with a cuddle. A few weeks ago I was told about an incident at the pub which was a great example of Nick being able to defuse a situation - and also him believing his own bullshit. These blokes were about to fight and Nick was trying to pull them apart. Others were telling Nick not to get involved. He turned and said, in all seriousness: 'Don't worry - I used to be a cop.' Everyone cracked up and forgot the fight.

Nick loves melodrama - he gets swept away in it. Recently he had our neighbour in tears, telling the story of how his grandmother had died. She was crying, he was crying - and his grandmother had died 2 ½ years ago. He will say to his mum sometimes, to get out of things, 'Remember, Mum, I have Down syndrome.' She will say, 'Don't use that bullshit line on me, son.'

One time we were having a man-to-man discussion about relationships and he said, 'Why can't I get a girlfriend - one without Down syndrome?' It was a hard thing for me to explain that relationships are based on being able to relate and having things in common. He said: 'Yeah, but why can't I have one that looks like J-Lo?' And now he has a girlfriend, Ruth, who he says is like J-Lo.

Nick hardly ever gets depressed but there are times he gets upset. He is a huge Swans fan and is in the cheer squad that makes the banners before games. When Tony Lockett announced his retirement, he was sitting in front of the TV crying, saying: 'Tony, you can't go.'

I have seen Nick grow up and get a job and now we are about to enter a new phase, with my girlfriend and me having a baby. It will be Nick the uncle, and we are both really looking forward to that.

**NICK:** I was in the park and Damien was walking past with his dog, Baxter. He said, 'Hi, I am Damien.' And I said, 'Hi, I am Nick.' That was how we met.

He looked like a half punk, like one of those horses with a long nose. What's it called? A unicorn. He looked pretty silly actually. Mum organised for Damien to come and look after me after school. I remember we used to play soccer after school and he would teach me to read and we would wrestle and play games. Wrestling is my life. I love wrestling. Damien is more into mud wrestling.

If I ever get into trouble I can ring up and Damien will help me out. If I am playing basketball and someone is picking on me, Damien will look after me. I rang him up one day and he said, 'Relax, relax.' And he came down and said, 'You leave him alone, he's my friend.'<sup>1</sup> And they did. Damien is my hero. I love him a lot.

I love going to the pub. At the Sir William Wallace Hotel [in Balmain] on Sunday they have free food and free pool. I love hot dogs. I help them clean up the pub after they close.

Damien doesn't get angry with me, except if I play the pokies. He doesn't like it when I play the pokies. He really, really hates it. He says, 'I am sorry, I should not get angry with you in this way, because you are my friend, but do not play the pokies.'

I have a new girlfriend. Her name is Ruth. Damien says to me to stand close to Ruth and behave myself. I make jokes about Ruth and call her Wally and she doesn't like that. He says not to make jokes about her. He says to buy her chocolates and flowers and make her happy.

Karoline [Damien's girlfriend] is going to have a baby. I feel very happy for Damien and very close to Karoline, I can feel they are happy. I said to him, 'You are the man who loves Karoline in your heart/

I am going to be a second uncle, because her brother will be the first uncle, but I will be the second uncle.

Damien is the closest friend I have ever had. I love him. He makes sure I do the right things. He helps me save my money. He is always gentle and tells me funny jokes.

When I was 18, Damien gave me a punk haircut. He said, 'Dude, get a haircut', so I did. We went out dancing to the Lizard Lounge, which was the first time I had ever done anything like that. It was great. But I looked pretty silly, just like him.

***Response to Two of Us:***

Greg Bearup's "Two of Us" (July 15) about two flatmates (one of whom has Down syndrome) was a heart-warming example of how two people who seem so different can be unconditionally accepting and supportive of each other. Positive, "real-life" stories like this help to dispel the ill-informed, negative perceptions of people with a disability that still linger in our community. Everybody is valuable and deserves respect. Thank you.

***Andrew Richardson***

*Chief Executive Officer*

*The House With No Steps*

(reprinted from *Good Weekend*, Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> August 2006)