

eyes on autism

AEIOU celebrates official opening of new Gold Coast Centre

It's official: AEIOU's new, purpose-built centre is now open on the Gold Coast.

The centre opened in time for children to commence Term Two in their new classrooms, and the official opening took place on Thursday 29 May, with the ceremony officiated by Minister for Disabilities The Hon. Tracy Davis, and Mayor Tom Tate.

The land for the centre was gifted by the Gold Coast City Council and the construction was made possible with philanthropic support from the Chain Reaction Challenge Foundation.

The centre features four purpose-built classrooms, a motor skills room, a parent training room, a staff meeting room and a parent room. Prior to the centre's development, AEIOU operated from two leased classrooms with support from GoodStart Childcare.

AEIOU designed the centre to meet the growing need for autism and early intervention support in the region, and is working with government with a goal to increase its capacity from 20 child placements to 40, to reduce waiting list times and provide adequate support for local families.



AEIOU celebrated the official opening of the new Gold Coast Centre in May



Melting away... the window for early intervention is short

To celebrate Autism Awareness Month, AEIOU Foundation joined pro-bono partner Junior, to help raise awareness and funds for children with autism in a special campaign that launched on 1 April 2014. The team was inspired to create a series of ice sculptures, to make a splash in Brisbane's Queen Street Mall.

The sculptures proved unique and artistic, and were based on a 1/1 scale of pre-school aged children. The installation featured four blue sculptures and one pink sculpture, to demonstrate the prevalence of autism in males. The fifth artwork was created live for viewers.

Each sculpture featured a special message, to illustrate the urgent need to improve access to life-changing intervention. This, coupled with the melting sculptures, helped demonstrate to the community that the window of opportunity

for early intervention is very small and there are many families missing out.

It's important to AEIOU to raise funds to help give every child the best start in life, and that includes access to an early intervention program that meets 2012 Australian Good Practice Guidelines, and is based on education and therapy practices that are proven to make a difference.

AEIOU was delighted to be joined by long-term supporters, including students from St Laurence's College, past and current families from the program and a number of dedicated volunteers to help raise awareness and collect funds on the day.

To see more photos of the installation and of AEIOU's Autism Awareness Month initiatives, follow us on Facebook!

Adelaide Centre opening soon!

AEIOU is closer to delivering early intervention and support to young children with autism in Adelaide, with a new centre expected to open by September. A centre has been leased in Huntfield Heights, with plans still underway to develop a purpose-built facility in partnership with Minda by 2017. In the meantime, the first intake of staff have been employed for the new service, and the program will commence with 10 full-time placements, before expanding to support 30 children by 2015.

Autism SA CEO Jon Martin said he welcomed AEIOU Foundation's establishment in Adelaide, explaining: "Access to quality, affordable early intervention is imperative for young children with autism. AEIOU is bringing additional support to our community and local families are certain to benefit from the service, which complements the existing programs available in Adelaide."

AEIOU's long-term plans remain the same: to construct a purpose-built centre in partnership with Minda. In the meantime, the Foundation is excited to offer support to local families.

The AEIOU Adelaide Centre will open at 19 Lindisfarne Road, Huntfield Heights.



what's on

Take a Hike Sunshine Coast 27 July 2014

For the first time, we're taking Take a Hike to the Sunshine Coast! Our participants are striving to raise \$50,000 for local children with autism. For details or to sponsor a participant, visit aeiou.org.au/take-a-hike-sunshine-coast.

Stafford City Brook Run 27 July 2014

The Stafford City Brook Run is an exciting 7km fun-run along the picturesque Kedron Brook in Brisbane. If you're keen to get amongst the community and enjoy the fresh air, this is for you! There's a course for kids, and also adults who are more seasoned runners. Better yet, this event raises funds for AEIOU! For details visit www.thebrookrun.com.au.

Take a Hike Townsville 10 August 2014

Now in its third year, Take a Hike Townsville is back, with a goal of raising \$75,000 to make a difference to the lives of children with autism in our Townsville centre. We're still taking recruits so if you'd like to join the challenge, sponsor a participant, or volunteer at the event, go to aeiou.org.au/take-a-hike-townsville.

Take a Hike Brisbane 19 October 2014

Finishing off the series for 2014 with a bang, our Take a Hike Brisbane participants have a goal to raise \$250,000 to help close the funding gap we experience across our Brisbane, Ipswich and Pine Rivers centres. Sign up or donate today, and if you can get behind the event as a sponsor or volunteer, we'd love to hear from you. Details at aeiou.org.au/take-a-hike-brisbane.



A word from our CEO

Alan Smith – CEO

We've set a cracking pace in 2014, and have enjoyed a number of exciting partnerships, events and milestones across the organisation. The one thing that binds all of us together, whether we work at AEIOU, enrol a child at AEIOU, or support the Foundation by donating time or money, is our desire to make a difference. Right now, there are 199 children enrolled in our centres and I make regular visits throughout the year to ensure I have an opportunity to meet the children in our care, understand their strengths and developments and engage with our team. I am constantly inspired by the children and their families, and our team members who are so committed to the futures of the families in our centres.

I feel a sense of pride when I see our staff celebrating new milestones with our families. This includes the moment when a young girl was able to hold a spoon, and feed herself for the first time. It includes the moment children are toilet trained, and develop self-help skills. It's hearing a young boy saying "Bye Dad, love you!" as he settles into the centre for the day. These are words that mean the world to any parent, and especially the parents who wait so long to hear them. At AEIOU we know how important the skill of communication is. So, the feeling is the same when children learn to express their needs, wants and feelings through PECs (Picture Exchange Cards), sign or other programs... we celebrate every moment with every individual. It's rewarding for all of us at AEIOU when we witness a child engage with their peers, our team and most importantly, their families.

Already this year, we have announced a new service in Adelaide, we have completed the construction of the new Gold Coast centre, which was made possible with thanks to the support we received from the Chain Reaction Foundation and the Gold Coast City Council. We brought families enrolled at AEIOU, and registered on our waitlist, together for a free conference with access to autism experts in June, and we have also hosted Take a Hike in Toowoomba Wide Bay, and the Gold Coast, with hikes on the Sunshine Coast and Brisbane yet to take place. We launched Autism Awareness Month, lighting a number of monuments blue across Queensland and launching the Melting Away exhibition with thanks to our partners at Junior. Along with the Queensland Chain Reaction Challenge, we have benefited from events including the Rotary Arts Spectacular, and the 50/50 Draw at a Brisbane Broncos match, to name a few.

There's more to come, with the Stafford City Brook Run in July, and The Mercedes Benz Brisbane Melbourne Cup Gala at City Hall is not to be missed.

As we finalise this newsletter, we are in the final stages of launching a new website, so be sure to visit us online at www.aeiou.org.au to keep up to date with the events and initiatives that are coming up. You can also read a number of family stories, new blog articles, and more. Thank you for your ongoing support. I look forward to seeing you throughout the year, while we all work together to create bright futures for children with autism.

Kind regards,

Alan Smith
CEO



St Laurence's College walking for autism

The students at St Laurie's will lace up for autism in August, for their annual walkathon which covers over 15 kilometres along the Brisbane river to raise funds and awareness for the children at AEIOU Foundation.

St Laurie's is a long-term supporter and friend to AEIOU, with students not only dedicating this event to the Foundation, but also taking the time to volunteer at various fundraising events and initiatives throughout the year.

The community spirit at the school is second to none, with the students leading their school to help AEIOU close the funding gap it experiences to deliver the program. Keep an eye out for a 'sea of yellow' as the students hit the pavement on Friday 8 August, in and around Brisbane's CBD. To help the boys reach their fundraising goals, and to find out more about the event, keep an eye on our website (aeiou.org.au) closer to the date, and follow us on Facebook.

Autism and Vaccinations

At AEIOU, we have a great commitment to research, using high quality research and evidence to inform our curriculum. We also invest in research, supporting and conducting various studies to provide greater insight into early intervention, and to benefit people with autism in the future.

In recent years, there has been ongoing debate regarding immunisation and autism, despite the lack of evidence linking the condition to routine vaccinations and proof the 1998 study conducted by Dr Andrew Wakefield, which linked the two, being found to show serious problems. This led to a retraction of the study's

findings from *The Lancet Journal* in 2010. Dr Wakefield was also struck off the Medical register in the United Kingdom.

In May, the University of Sydney released a study reviewing all of the previous research, dispelling the myth.

Using seven sets of data from around the world, and involving more than 1.25 million children, the study concluded there was no evidence to suggest common vaccines for measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough resulted in the development of autism or autism spectrum disorder.

The study was conducted by Associate Professor Guy Eslick from the University of Sydney Medical School, who found: "the data consistently shows the lack of evidence for an association between autism, autism spectrum disorders and childhood vaccinations... providing no reason to avoid immunisation on these grounds."



Broncos Captain Corey Parker is kicking goals for autism and AEIOU!

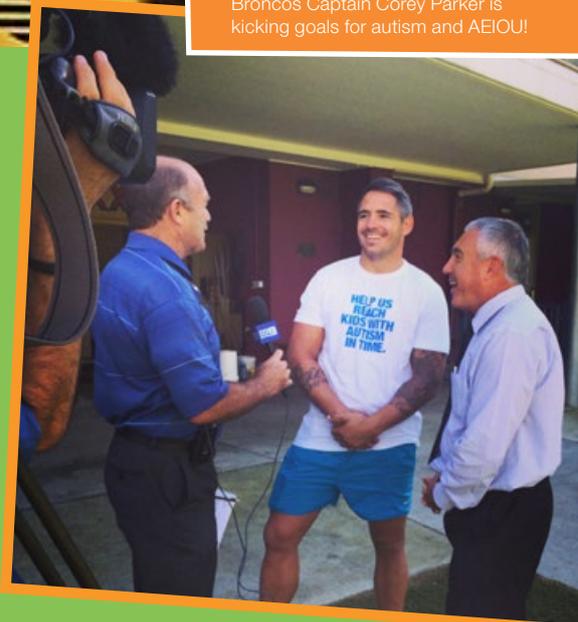
Corey Parker kicking goals for kids with autism

AEIOU enjoys a great relationship with its Ambassadors, with our friends including Brisbane Broncos Captain Corey Parker, who has made a commitment to dedicate all of the goals he kicks, to the children at AEIOU.

In April, AEIOU joined the Brisbane Broncos for a special cheque presentation for the funds raised from the partnership in 2013, and a renewal of the initiative for 2014, which sees \$100 donated to AEIOU for every goal kicked.

During April, more than 30,000 football fans also had the chance to win big while getting behind Corey and children with autism, with AEIOU named the charity beneficiary for the 50/50 raffle at the Broncos V Parramatta game on Friday 4 April 2014.

AEIOU was also grateful for the support of Suncorp Stadium, who donated a corporate box, along with the ongoing support of the Broncos, who donated 45 tickets for family and friends of AEIOU to join us at the game.





Guests at Lynn's Lunch helped raise enough funds to provide financial support to up to 20 families accessing AEIOU's service

Lynn's Lunch – ninth annual event raises funds to provide financial support to families at AEIOU

On behalf of the Lynn Wright Memorial Fund, AEIOU thanks each guest and supporter who joined the ninth annual Lynn's Lunch on 2 May 2014 at the Victoria Park Complex. That day, guests at the luncheon helped raise enough funds to support more than 20 families who may need financial assistance from the Lynn Wright Memorial Fund in order to attend AEIOU's program.

The event was hosted by Sharyn Ghidella, and local Brisbane inspiration, Cathy Coory, joined AEIOU Foundation to share her personal insights into some of the greatest triumphs and adversities in her life.

At the event, AEIOU was supported by 20 incredible volunteers, including 15 men and women who work for QBE, and five from Martin College. Their help on the day made an enormous difference and is greatly appreciated.

Selina Sharratt, whose son Felix attends an AEIOU centre, shared her family's story with guests and you can read more about Felix on page 11 in this edition of Eyes on Autism.



Tim Sharp TedX Sydney presentation

The team at AEIOU was very proud when our friend and Ambassador Tim Sharp was invited to speak at TEDx live in Sydney with his mother Judy.

Together, they shared their story, which has led Tim to become a renowned artist, with his work taking him all over the world and giving him many great opportunities, not least of which includes the chance to make new friends, feel included, and accepted. He inspires us all. Download the TEDx video by going to the link tedxsydney.com/live and clicking on the image of Judy and Tim Sharp.



AEIOU Ambassador Tim Sharp (pictured with AEIOU staff in 2013) and his mother Judy shared their inspiring story at TEDx Live in Sydney in April

Alex Perry pledges support for children with autism

Plans are underway to release a suite of community service announcements, with heartfelt messages personally delivered by AEIOU's Ambassadors. The first video was filmed in April, and comes from Alex Perry, an Australian fashion icon and a long-time friend and Ambassador of AEIOU Foundation. AEIOU also plans to develop similar messages with the support of Brisbane Bronco Corey Parker, 4BC Presenter Ian Skippen, and renowned artist, Tim Sharp.

Stay tuned for details.



Alex Perry recently filmed a new Community Service Announcement for AEIOU and children with autism. Stay tuned for its release!



Chain Reaction Challenge – it's a wrap, Queensland!

The AEIOU team was there when 48 men and women cycled the last leg of the Chain Reaction Queensland Challenge, riding into Little Stanley Street at South Bank on 9 May, 2014. The event took place over seven gruelling days and includes a 1,000 kilometre cycling route.

Together, the participants, comprised of leading Queensland business identities, raised more than \$1 million as part of the challenge, with AEIOU Foundation and the Starlight Children's Foundation the major beneficiaries.

This year, the cyclists conquered one of Australia's most iconic cycling road courses through extreme weather conditions.

The peloton included Chesterton International Managing Director Brad Bennett, Thiess Executive General Manager Richard Kelleway, Katarzyna Group Managing Director Raphael Bickle, Herron Todd White Executive Director Todd Gillespie, Bennett & Philp Lawyers Director Michael Byrom, Morgans Stockbroker Troy Fidler, and BBC Digital Sales Manager, Mark Clough.

The support from the Chain Reaction Challenge Foundation has made it possible for AEIOU to construct its purpose-built centre on the Gold Coast. AEIOU warmly thanks and acknowledges the Chain Reaction committee, team and cyclists who made the initiative a reality.



This year's Chain Reaction cyclists raised over \$1 million for children's charities, including AEIOU Foundation





Our Take a Hike teams are taking Australia by storm, with the initiative fast becoming one of Australia's largest walks for autism



The Rotary Arts Spectacular raised \$20,000 for AEIOU and the children we support



Take a Hike...!

Take a Hike is AEIOU Foundation's most significant fundraising initiative, and it's growing! The 2014 series commenced in Toowoomba this year, and took place in Wide Bay for the first time on Sunday May 25.

As this newsletter goes to print, the Gold Coast team is getting ready to hit the pavement, with the event taking place on 22 June. We're launching Take a Hike on the Sunshine Coast on 27 July, before Townsville takes its turn on 10 August, with the final wrap for the series taking place in Brisbane on 19 October.

Take a Hike is a 40km challenge, which takes place on one day, giving all hikers the chance to change the life of a child who has an autism diagnosis.

Our Toowoomba hikers raised over \$77,000, with the event firmly established in its third year. The Wide Bay Hikers have raised more than \$15,000, which is a terrific effort for the group in the event's inaugural year. AEIOU appreciates the efforts of every hiker and supporter of the event and looks forward to stepping up the challenge in Adelaide in 2015. For information, to sign up to participate, or to donate to a hiker, visit our website at www.aeiou.org.au/take-a-hike today!

The 35TH Brisbane Rotary Art Spectacular dedicates its support to children with autism

Coinciding with Autism Awareness Month, Brisbane's Riverside Centre precinct at 123 Eagle Street was abuzz, with the 35th Rotary Art Spectacular taking place from 3 - 12 April 2014.

Hosted by three Rotary Clubs, Brisbane High-Rise, Hamilton and Stones Corner, the annual 10 day exhibition is a popular event on the Brisbane event calendar, attracting more than 35,000 guests each year, and is recognised as one of the most prestigious art exhibitions in Queensland.

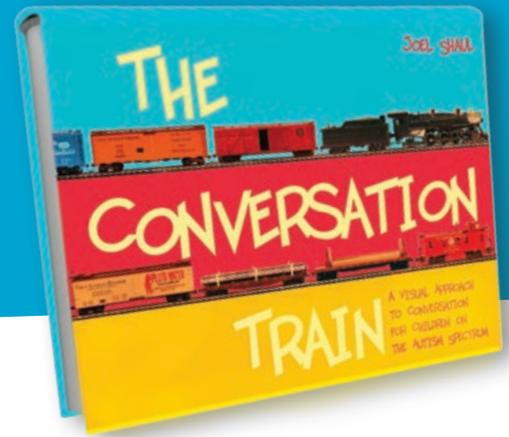
The exhibition comprised 450 carefully selected pieces of art from a range of talented contemporary and emerging artists, and is a showcase for artists and various art forms. AEIOU was named a major beneficiary in 2014, alongside Rotary Oceania Medical Aid for Children (ROMAC) and various charity projects that are supported by the three Rotary clubs.



Title: The Conversation Train

Author: Joel Shaul

In each Eyes on Autism newsletter, we aim to bring you a review of a book that may support a child, or a family who has a child, with autism. In this edition, we're joined by AEIOU Foundation Speech Pathologist Rebecca Mead, who reviewed The Conversation Train.



THE BOOK:

Concept: "The Conversation Train" is a picture book designed to help children with autism understand how to have a conversation. It uses trains as metaphors for the elements of a conversation, whether it is the engine of the train as the greeting or a derailed train that represents a conversation that has broken down or "derailed."

This is a practical book, with various examples of conversations, along with "fill in the blanks" tasks. Shaul has intentionally kept the pages simple, with plain backgrounds and short text. This helps the young reader focus on the task and not get 'lost' among the images. It is designed to read aloud with your child so you can discuss what it means to have a conversation, something many of our families crave with their child on the spectrum.

I really enjoyed how the book breaks down each element of a conversation, has several examples and then has visuals to help support the child's own conversations. I can see how practical a book like this would be for a verbal child who is struggling with how to enter, maintain and end a conversation. Whilst it's not going to be as appropriate for most children who are currently enrolled at an AEIOU centre, it might be helpful for those who have transitioned to school; children of this age and development level are most likely to benefit from "The Conversation Train."

Get Active for Autism... Join the AEIOU Blue Crew!

Some of you have joined the AEIOU Blue Crew for events like the Bridge to Brisbane. Now you can go further!

AEIOU is registered with organisations including Go Fundraise, Everyday Hero, Register Now and JustGiving so you can join AEIOU's Blue Crew for any event, and get active while raising funds for autism. If you find an event and AEIOU is not registered, please send us an email to giving@aeiou.org.au, and we can facilitate a membership so you can direct your supporters to a page that will help you fundraise for AEIOU Foundation.

We're looking forward to the Bridge to Brisbane event which is coming up in September. If you're planning to register to run, or walk the 5km or 10km course, be sure to sign up as part of our Blue Crew... it's a great day out for the family and every step you take can help make a difference to a child at AEIOU.

Follow us on Facebook for details.

Meet Michael Scanlon – Behaviour Therapist, Nathan centre

Michael joined the team at AEIOU in early 2013, after moving to Brisbane from the United States. His older brother has an autism diagnosis, and inspired Michael to study psychology and specialise in behaviour therapy. "After university I began to work with families with in-home therapy, and also at an autism school in the United States. Shortly after I came to Brisbane, I joined the team at AEIOU Nathan. Not long after, the new behaviour therapy role was established across the program," Michael says.

Michael ensures every child has his attention throughout the day. "We start with our circle time, then transition to meal times. We run learning centres, where I work with children to teach them skills like imitation, visual perception, play skills, and the ability to listen and respond. Once children can do this, we work with children on pre-writing skills,



pre-reading skills, and understanding numbers. If there is anything that we can't work on intensively during the program, we try to target those goals in the more individualised therapy times.

Michael says his role is very rewarding, and he particularly enjoys watching children develop new skills. "It's really exciting when you see them gain the ability to learn, and have the tools they need to do more on their own."

He says he hopes children at AEIOU will be able to participate in the workforce one day, with their own unique skills and strengths. "I hope that their autism will not stop them from being able to contribute. Even for children who may not communicate verbally, there are other ways that they can communicate, and we should strive to ensure nothing holds them back."

Sponsor Spotlight

Synergy Accountants

We simply couldn't do what we do without the help of individuals, and corporate and community partners. That includes people like the team at Synergy Accounting, one of our sponsors for this year's Take a Hike Toowoomba. Synergy made a sponsorship commitment to the event, and registered three teams of four hikers to trek the 40km challenge. Together, they hosted a number of fundraising activities ahead of the event, including a sausage sizzle, hot cross bun drive and gourmet BBQ, to raise funds to benefit the children in our program.

Synergy brings this focus on the community to all aspects of their business, with the goal of becoming trusted advisors to their clients. Offering business, tax and specialist accounting services, including retirement planning, wealth creation and asset protection, Synergy's emphasis on building relationships means they are able to deliver business outcomes aimed at creating your ideal lifestyle.

AEIOU thanks the team at Synergy Accountants for their support throughout the duration of Take a Hike, leading the way in the community to help ensure the event was a great success and will go on to make a difference to the lives of all the children enrolled in the local program.



Buildcorp supports children with autism at AEIOU

This year, Buildcorp donated \$20,000 to AEIOU Foundation as part of its commitment to make a difference in the community, and support the causes close to the hearts of its employees.

Joel Oliver, whose son attends AEIOU's Bray Park centre, submitted a proposal to support AEIOU Foundation to the Buildcorp Charitable Fund. The committee, led by company owners Josephine and Tony Sukkar, was inspired to support AEIOU and made a generous donation that will close the funding gap AEIOU experiences for two full-time child placements in 2014. This will allow AEIOU to support more children and families and will make a lasting difference to the lives of many young children across AEIOU's centres.

Buildcorp's service offering spans many disciplines of commercial construction, including base building construction, refurbishment, building upgrades, fit-out, remedial building, heavy industrial projects and architectural joinery.

In 2012, Buildcorp launched the Buildcorp Charitable Fund as a sub-fund of The Trust Company Foundation. This is a charitable structure to give the staff members across Buildcorp an opportunity to support their community. Together, they fundraise, donate and have a workplace-giving program, where staff contributions are matched dollar-for-dollar by Buildcorp.

The mission of the Buildcorp Charitable Fund is to provide a common vehicle to maximise the impact of the collective giving spirit of our team and business partners, to those initiatives and organisations dear to the Buildcorp community.

The team at Buildcorp raised \$20,000 for AEIOU's children, helping close the gap for two child placements



THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS





Join us to cheer on AEIOU Ambassador Thomas Fraser Holmes at the Commonwealth Games!

We were thrilled to join spectators at the Australian Championships in April, where we watched Thomas Fraser Holmes dominate in the 400 metre individual medley for the fifth year running. Tom also placed second in the 200 metre men's freestyle event. As a result, Tom, who is an AEIOU Ambassador, was rewarded with a place at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow from 23 July – 3 August this year.

Tom is a regular visitor at our Gold Coast centre, where he joins the team to assist in a variety of learning centres as part of his commitment to support the children in our program.

We'll be cheering Tom on when he competes at the Games, and we encourage all of our supporters to get behind him, too!



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Stafford City to again support the Brook Run and AEIOU Foundation

AEIOU is delighted to be named a beneficiary of the 2014 Stafford City Brook Run, set to take place on Sunday 27 July.

It follows the success of the inaugural Brook Run, sponsored by the Stafford City Shopping Centre.

The shopping centre's commercial and community support is pivotal to the success of the Brook Run, which supports Brisbane Inner North Sporting Communities (BINSC), a body that exists to drive future development and growth in a range of sports in its local area.

Further to attracting over 700 participants in 2013, the event features a professional 7km fun run for a range of athletic abilities and ages, as well as a 2km event for children.

This is an event that presents a great, active day for the whole family, so be sure to sign up to participate, or even pop down on the day to join in the festivities. For details, visit AEIOU's Facebook page or the events section on our website (www.aeiou.org.au).



Warner Social Golfers Raising Funds for AEIOU Bray Park

In March, the Warner Social Golf Committee visited AEIOU's Bray Park Centre to meet the children they raised funds for at the annual charity golf day in February.

Since 2011, the Committee has raised over \$20,000 for our Bray Park centre, helping fund learning resources and equipment to be used in the program to ensure every child has the best opportunity to reach their full potential.

Better yet, the Warner Social Golf Committee has announced AEIOU Foundation will be the sole beneficiary of their fund raising efforts in 2015. The funds raised will remain local, helping the children in our Bray Park Centre with important resources and centre improvements.

AEIOU extends a big thank you to the Committee, including President Ross Brown, Treasurer Dennis Parker and Fundraising Coordinator Gaye Parker.



About Rob

By Betty and Dave Rindfleish

Before our son, Rob, began at AEIOU, he had no verbal communication at all. He had very little eye contact, and would roam continuously, spinning and running. He would run at a wall and crash into it then fall in a heap, get up and do it again. I felt very frustrated that I was unable to access any help for him.

We encountered a minimum of a three month waiting list to access a one hour therapy session, once week, over 100kms away from our home. I was trying to do what I could myself, but really had no idea. We discovered AEIOU in Toowoomba, and in January this year, Rob started at the centre there.

It was a big decision for us, because we don't live nearby.

We (Rob 4, Chloe 2, and I) leave home at 5am every Monday morning and travel 320kms to Toowoomba to drop Rob at AEIOU by 9am. We then stay four nights in a home very generously made available for us by a wonderful family from our local community. Dave stays at home to work and we return home at around 5pm Friday afternoons.

Every weekend since Rob started at AEIOU, we have noticed something new he can do. Now after five months, all those little things have begun to fuse into bigger things and in a sort of "snow ball" effect he just seems to keep surprising us. Rob is now talking in sentences, using "please" and "thank-you".

We can play a game of ball together, he joins in games with his peers, and we can also go out for dinner together and have a pleasant time as a family. In fact, our family life is much more relaxed now that we can communicate with Rob. There is no more spinning or crashing into walls. I remember when I first met another mother whose child was starting his second year at AEIOU. She told me, "I'm not sure what they do in here, it's like they have a magic wand!" How true!

It's not only Rob who has been learning from the team at AEIOU – I have also been learning a great deal. The support from the team there has been a huge comfort. Our six month trial has turned into a two year commitment, and our goals for Rob are also expanding.

On top of everything, all the changes he has had to cope with and the expectations we all have of him, the most significant thing is how happy Rob is at AEIOU! We are so grateful to everyone helping us and excited about what the future holds for our little man.

Bring on School!



A family story



About Felix

By Selina Sharratt and Brett McKinnon

Right from the word go – Brett and I knew that life with Felix would be an adventure.

At birth he spent time in special care, by 3 months he'd undergone his first surgery to correct his club feet, by 7 months we'd discovered his anaphylaxis, and by 12 months he was a popular regular at Gold Coast hospital where he'd stay during his bad bouts of asthma.

While his health was our primary concern, we had also started to wonder if something else was going on.

Looking back, we can see that Felix never made real developmental progress.

When he turned one, I told our doctor that I was concerned about Felix. That he seemed docile, he hardly made a sound, and as hard as we tried to engage him – Felix was completely uninterested.

He told me that it was way too early to be concerned and he encouraged me to take a yoga class and try to relax. But as Felix grew older and we saw no improvements, that feeling that something was wrong never went away.

I trolled the internet looking for answers, and the more I typed in Felix's behaviour, the more the word 'autism' would appear.

By 14 months Felix's paediatrician also shared our concerns and we decided to take him through the diagnosis process. Months later and just as Felix was about to turn 2 we were back at the paediatricians and as expected, Felix was diagnosed with autism.

Although we knew what was coming, we weren't at all prepared for the reality.

We had expected to hear that Felix had a mild form of autism – that he'd need therapy but he would soon learn to talk, he'd then go to a typical school, go off to university and live happily ever after.

At worst, we thought he'd be socially awkward and may take longer to learn than has peers. But when the doctor told us Felix appeared to tick all the boxes for the severe disability we were left in a complete state of shock.

He said we must be prepared for the fact that Felix may never talk, he may have an intellectual impairment, and it is likely that he will always need full-time care.

We sat there in complete silence and in a state of utter disbelief. Not for one second had we contemplated that this thing called autism could have such a profound effect on our son.

He told us we must act now and get Felix intensive therapy as it was the only way to improve his development – and the best place for Felix would be AEIOU Foundation.

While we were shattered, Felix's diagnosis would also be the greatest of motivations. No matter what it took, we would get Felix the help he needed to thrive.

The very next day I rang AEIOU and shortly after we attended an open day, and we were so impressed by what we saw. We put his name down and waited for a place to come up.

At home we got the ball rolling by arranging hours of expensive intervention, but Felix would make his therapists wish they'd chosen a different career. Despite their best efforts, Felix didn't show any signs of improvement and as the months crept by his condition seemed to consume him.

He'd begun to make a continual groaning noise, he'd scream in any new environment, he hated being around other people, he hardly slept a wink, and he'd started to cover his ears like he was in pain.

By the time Felix turned 2 ½, we had become desperate. But, that's when we got the call we'd been waiting for – there was a spot available for him at AEIOU.

We knew their biggest hurdle would be finding a way to connect with him.

And ever so slowly as the months ticked by we started to see Felix change. At home Felix was giving us cuddles and not trying to put us in a head lock. He was calmer, more engaged and he seemed so much happier.

Somehow the staff at AEIOU had found a way to tune into 'planet Felix' and they were able to teach him the foundation skills of learning.

This was no easy task. Teaching Felix basic skills like "touch nose" or "point to mum" may take a typical child a few minutes to master, but for Felix to understand such a simple instruction would take him several years.

It was painstakingly slow, required a lot of patience, but ultimately their persistence paid off. Fast forward almost four years and Felix is unrecognisable to the boy we took to AEIOU all those years ago.

Among a long list of amazing achievements, Felix can dress and feed himself, brush his teeth, clean-up his mess, he's doing 50-100 piece puzzles and my personal favourite – Felix has finally learnt to use the toilet!

Then there are the miracles – he has learnt to communicate through the use of an iPad – he uses a talking program to ask us for food, drinks, cuddles, and toys.

He's so close to talking that I'm increasingly nervous he may have picked up some of mummy's colourful language – oops!

Jokes aside, what Felix has been able to achieve is made even more remarkable by the fact that he does, in fact, have an intellectual impairment.

His doctors tell us they are amazed by his progress, how he is achieving things that his level of disability should make near impossible. Parents literally stop me to say they can't believe Felix is the same boy, and to be honest, neither can we.

2014 marks the end of our time at AEIOU and we will be forever grateful for the life changing impact the foundation has had on Felix and our entire family.

His progress has meant we are able to look to the future with hope that Felix will be able to live as independently as possible, even have a little job, a girlfriend and just be happy.

On behalf of my family we would like to give our heartfelt thanks to everyone at AEIOU, for their dedication to Felix and for helping to transform him into the little superstar he is today. Without doubt sending Felix to AEIOU has been our family's greatest investment and we hope sharing Felix's story will give hope to other families who are at the start of their own autism experience.



HELP US REACH KIDS WITH AUTISM IN TIME.

The age for early intervention for children with autism is 2½ to 6 years. It's a terribly short window.

With more than 200 children enrolled every year, AEIOU Foundation's education and therapy support program gives children with autism the best chance for a brighter future.

But we rely on community support to deliver this life-changing program. Will you help us?

Donate today at aeiou.org.au



Yes, I would like to help children with autism

Contact details:

Title: _____ First Name: _____ Surname: _____

Address: _____

Suburb: _____ State: _____ Postcode: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Please charge my:

MasterCard Visa **OR** Please find enclosed my cheque/Money Order.

(Made payable to AEIOU Foundation).

Card No: _____/_____/_____/_____ Expiry: ____/____

Name on Card _____

Make a single donation: (Please tick your selection) Donations of \$2 or more are tax deductible.

- \$10,000 Child placement at AEIOU for 1 year \$5,000 Interactive whiteboard for a centre
- \$500 iPad for a classroom \$100 Colour cards to help with speech therapy
- \$50 Art supplies for fine motor skills \$_____ (Please specify amount)

Make a recurring gift: (Please tick your selection)

- Weekly Fortnightly Monthly Other _____ \$_____ (Please specify amount)

Autism is not rare, it affects 1 in 100 people in Australia. There is no known cause and no cure, but research shows early intervention makes a big difference to a child's development.

AEIOU Foundation is one of Australia's leading providers of full-time early intervention for children diagnosed with autism, aged 2½ to 6 years.

Children with autism experience the world differently, and AEIOU's education and therapy support program gives these children the skills and tools for school, employment and beyond, changing the course of their lives.