CHATS WITH
PEOPLE WHO USE SRV

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AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL ROLE VALORISATION ASSOCIATION

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Jane Sherwin is an SRV and Passing Senior Trainer, and Convenor of the ASRVA Accreditation Committee. She is well regarded for her consulting, writing, teaching and facilitation work over the years with services and families across Australia and overseas.

GREG: Jane, you first went to an SRV 3-day workshop in the early 90s … a long time ago! What made SRV 'stick' for you?

JANE: Honestly, SRV just made sense to me.

My search started in my first job as an Occupational Therapist in a psychiatric hospital. I was working with people with disabilities in a place where devaluation was, quite literally, built in to the model of service. People were treated as 'sick', 'burdens' and 'menaces', and little hope was held for meaningful and fulfilling lifestyles.

I looked for an alternative to institutional living. One path was working in a community setting with families who had a family member with a disability. I also worked in a (what was then very progressive) set of group homes, eventually becoming Director there. The 1980s were heady days, as the group home model was informed by Normalisation, the precursor to SRV. Lives there, while much more active than at the psych hospital, were still constrained and the role of 'client/resident' was the Big role.

I continued to take on roles focused on positive change, especially around work and employment for people with significant disabilities. Even so, I still had a sense of unease … until I came across SRV. That's when things started to click.

GREG: What do you find most satisfying about your involvement with SRV?

JANE: A turning point was when I attended the first Australian 3-day intensive SRV workshop. Light bulbs everywhere. I finally had concepts and language for what I'd seen in restrictive systems, and also for the possibilities I'd been hoping for.

Over time, my confidence in SRV has grown. It's a set of ideas that are both practical and powerful, whether used in the lives of individuals, groups or at a societal level. I have seen the difference that using SRV can make, time after time.

> ***SRV gives me a sense of confident hope because I've actually seen the difference it can make in people's lives. It is not a 'naïve' hope.***

SRV keeps us focused on what we're working towards: better lives and valued roles. It also reminds us what we're working against: relentless devaluation.

SRV has shaped me personally, too. For example, while SRV itself isn't a values base, the material on Heightened Vulnerabilities and Interpersonal Identification helped me

understand more deeply why and how people with devalued status are treated, and the profound impacts of that treatment. SRV opened the door to greater compassion.

And the Conservatism Corollary, 'going the extra mile', clarified why many people with devalued status need more, not less: more support, more time, more favourable conditions. Again, this is founded on an appreciation of heightened vulnerabilities, especially vulnerability to exclusion, low expectations, being controlled, lost roles, or never getting valued roles in the first place. It's helped me advocate with clearer words and on firmer footing.

GREG: What challenges you the most about using SRV Jane?

JANE: Oh, two big things. Both relate to how the movement for Better Lives has been limited by changes at a systems level (with some exceptions).

> ***First of all, I have been hugely frustrated and concerned about the rise of 'market-based' systems like in the NDIS and the (now called) Support at Home program for older people.***

SRV helps us focus on all things to do with the people and their needs. These are the programmatic matters. All administrative matters are non-programmatic matters. From an SRV perspective, non-programmatic matters should support the programmatic matters.

Both these initiatives (NDIS and Support at Home) are primarily about non-programmatic matters and have never been highly enhancing of the programmatic matters. In practice, neither system has been clearly or genuinely focused on changing the perceptions that fuel devaluation, nor has the NDIS been designed to foster valued roles in home, neighbourhood, school, work, or community life.

Instead, people have been positioned as customers of human services, and those services have become businesses competing for clients and market share.

SRV lenses helped me anticipate that the focus would shift back to people's 'insufficiencies' rather than their potential and possibilities. Conversations quickly became dominated by talk of money, rules, and transactions.

This market approach has caused harm – including the loss of small community initiatives and the expansion of segregated and congregated options, such as the growth of special schools in Queensland. In workshops and planning sessions, it often felt like the NDIS was sucking all the air out of the room.

Overall, these systems have too often been barriers to the programmatic matters that are most likely to lead to better lives.

> ***A second challenge has been the widespread adoption of 'choice and control' as buzzwords.***

Services can claim people have choice when the options are still narrowly designed by the service. SRV helps us raise the level of discussion to ask, 'to what extent does this person have autonomy in their lives? Sadly, it

is possible to 'choose' whilst having very little real autonomy.

Both of these challenges have shifted attention away from what matters most: better lives through valued roles, greater competencies, and positive imagery. Instead, we have dichotomies: 'personalised service vs business', and 'good lives vs market forces,' with only small pockets of hope shining through.

GREG: How does SRV influence your day-to-day life now?

JANE: Well, this is a time of transition now that I have let go of the roles of Teacher, Consultant, ASRVA Board member and nature photographer. I am embracing SRV as a guide to my older-age journey and its use in the lives of devalued people in much more personal ways.

The SRV lens of valued roles is so useful. I'm maintaining roles such as mentor and writer, while joyfully taking up new ones: book club member, member of the local First Nations Allies group, Tai Chi student, and beginner watercolour painter. I'm strengthening my roles as an active neighbour, bush and wildlife enthusiast and dog lover.

My roles of daughter and niece have been expanded to include more caring and support aspects. SRV has shaped many family conversations about the limits of nursing home models: what my Mum and Uncle would lose (like roles, autonomy, belongings, their own routines, friendships, hope), even while gaining certain supports (like being watched over and receiving medical assistance).

SRV helps me balance deep respect for Mum and my Uncle's autonomy with honest exploration of their vulnerabilities, and to take practical action like home adaptations, equipment, and thoughtful planning.

I am also using SRV to learn, think and talk about the experiences of First Nations people, both historically and today.

GREG: Who has influenced your understanding of SRV, and what has sustained you?

JANE: I've learned the most from people who've actually tried to apply SRV: family members like Glenys Mann; people with disabilities like Mike Duggan, former Community Resource Unit Chair; and the many service leaders and workers I've worked with.

Their questions and struggles stretched me in the best ways. I'm deeply grateful that they let me into their lives and shared such rich conversations.

Writing has also taught me a lot, especially writing SRV-based service evaluations. Having to write clearly about SRV is a terrific discipline. It also helps greatly with clarity of thinking.

Interestingly, it is those conversations and that writing that have sustained me over the years.

Oh, a P.S. I've long been enthralled by the way Dr Wolfensberger and Michael Kendrick think.

They go intentionally and fearlessly 'deep', uncovering what underpins an idea or an action, and naming dynamics that others overlook. They read widely and have always been concerned with a far broader range of issues than (just) SRV.

GREG: What other bodies of knowledge have shaped the way you use SRV?

JANE: I'm glad you asked. There are other bodies of knowledge that really help the application of SRV. For me, the following have been crucial: Michael Kendrick's work on Right Relationship, Bob Dick's work on relationship-based community development, approaches to community change strategies, and adult learning & facilitation.

Each has added something vital to how I understand and apply SRV in practical ways.

GREG: Looking back, is there anything you'd do differently?

JANE: I think I'd be more outspoken … not about SRV itself, but about what SRV helped me notice in systems like the NDIS and the Home Support Program. SRV can be an 'early warning system', and I sometimes wish I'd sounded the alarms a little louder.

GREG: What would you suggest to someone who's just done their first SRV theory workshop?

JANE: Talk about SRV. A lot. Go to SRV workshops more than once. Attend the SRV practicum called Passing.

Join ASRVA, come to events, and connect with others who are learning. Support your local SRV group if there is one. And if there isn't, start something, even informally. Some of the best SRV conversations I've seen have happened around a dining room table.

'Think' SRV more. For example: How well do you appreciate heightened vulnerabilities and what is one thing you can do to off-set those vulnerabilities in the life of one individual? Are you using role goals? What's one thing you can do to help a person be more fully in a valued role?

GREG: Thanks very much for your rich responses Jane.

JANE: And to ASRVA, thanks for this conversation.