



Priscilla Sutton



I'm sitting here in my lounge room, looking at a bunch of prosthetics all covered in bubble wrap, wondering about what part of this adventure and my life as an amputee that I should write onto paper and share with you.

Between the bubble wrap and the limbs is the outcome of a small idea of mine that turned into one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I call it Spare Parts.

At the beginning of 2010 I wanted to take on a creative project, something to supplement my day

job at Queensland Health. Just what that project was going to be was anyone's guess. Then one day I was cleaning out a cupboard at home, and pulled out a few of my old legs, and thought how fun it might be to get one of my creative friends to do something with them to hang on my wall. But I couldn't decide what friends to ask! And then I thought if I have two old legs in just four years, I wonder how many there are lurking in other cupboards and sheds just collecting dust?

I asked around and told a few people about this 'crazy idea' I had – an exhibition that uses old

prosthetic limbs as the canvas. I was quite surprised at just how well everyone received and loved the idea. I rang my favourite art space, the Brisbane Powerhouse, and by chance they had a gallery space free later in the year. The curator loved the idea and I was given the green light! I went along to an advisory committee meeting held by the Queensland Amputee Limb Service (QALS) to talk about the exhibition and the limb drive I was about to start. The presentation before me was by a charity collecting old limbs for Uganda. It was a heart wrenching presentation, with photos of locals – mostly amputee kids –



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projected on the wall. I felt a little uncomfortable to be the next presenter. I wasn't prepared like they were, there were no slides – it was just me, and my words. I made a comment to Deb from QALS that maybe Spare Parts was silly – and she assured me that it was a great idea and just as important. It meant a lot for me to have the support of Deb, and for her to believe in what I was trying to do.

After this the limbs started coming in. I also put up flyers in clinics, and on pretty much any website that I could. I started a blog to share the photos of the donations and stories of original owners where possible. I drove from coast to coast to collect bits and pieces, and met some amazing characters.

I loved the calls too... “err hello, I'm an amputee and I read a sign that you want some legs?” was the usual start to some of the best phone conversations I've ever had, and I will never forget.

I also convinced some friends to help collect limbs. One great story was a friend, Mark, who happened to be going to Sydney at the same time I came across a few legs on offer down there. It was fate really, as Mark was flying down to pick up a new car and drive it back. The limbs were not far from the car pick up point and he was happy to help. On the day however the guy who sourced the limbs wasn't going to be home, so he said he'd leave them at the local servo for Mark to collect! It was all very funny, and Mark went to the servo and said to the girl

behind the counter “Apparently a guy left some legs for me?”

So here Mark is, in a car not yet registered in his name, with a boot full of legs, on the highway back to Brisbane. I am sure if he got pulled up it would have been a great story line for Dexter.

My shed filled up pretty quickly with donations, the Facebook page was starting to get lots of followers, and the momentum was already building. In the end I had 65 pre loved prosthetics donated, and they came from all over Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, and also America and Laos. Adam Hills, the host of ABC TV's Spicks and Specks even gave me one, which was pretty exciting! I had below knee legs, above knee legs, a hip, hands, arms, and even a prosthetic eye.

I think that donating prosthetics for an exhibition was a therapeutic experience for many people. Lots of amputees were excited to have something fun to do with their old leg. And others were simply happy to get rid of a dust collector. A few prosthetics came from families of amputees that had passed away, and it was a beautiful way for them to not chuck something out but instead see a piece of their loved one live on. More often than not I think that amputees consider their prosthetic to be a part of their body, and many of us can't bare the thought of putting an old arm or leg in the bin.

Each prosthetic was a permanent donation, which turned some people off – they wanted their limb back at the end which was an impossible promise I couldn't make. Who knew what some of these artists were going to do? I had tattoo artists, painters, sculptors, comic artists, a milliner, a fashion designer, stencil artists, street artists, graffiti artists... such a diverse mix! The only creative consideration was that no one was to re-create or emulate a traumatic scenario. But beyond that, they could do whatever they wanted.

The blog was not only a place for me to share the adventure of Spare Parts, but it also acted as a shopping cart for the artists to choose their prosthetic canvas.

The media attention was growing – newspapers and radio were all keen to help me find some limbs. The journalists were asking lots of in-depth questions – they were fascinated with the idea and it was as if for the first time they were ‘allowed’ to ask the things their Mum told them not to as a child. It made me realise that I should get more kids involved. I already had 12 year old artist, Bunya Curran, on the list because I knew his parents and often admired his artwork at a gallery they used to own. So I decided to put together a school competition to kick-start the conversation with the younger members of the community. I sent out posters and entry forms to every high school in Brisbane. The students had to show or explain what they wanted to achieve, and I provided



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an outline of a basic prosthetic on plain paper. The entries were AMAZING and each time I opened an envelope I was in awe.

The winner was Breanna Stewart, a year 11 student from Redeemer Lutheran College in Rochedale. She created a rose out of a leg, and it was so very beautiful. I am so proud of Breanna, not only for the amazing artwork but also for her maturity with the media attention that her winning entry got. She was a cover girl for the local paper, appeared on 4ZZZ radio with me and was such a great ambassador for the exhibition. It was the first time she had ever met an amputee and ever really looked at a prosthetic. It makes me so happy to help build awareness, and experiences like this – especially for young people.

Spare Parts came together quite naturally. The artists were all so excited about the new challenge, the venue were thrilled with the line up, and everything was paid for by a generous amount of funding and sponsorship.

The opening night attracted an endless stream of people, it was so busy and at some points you couldn't even get to the limbs hanging on the wall! There was so much excitement in the room, people were looking at each piece with such intense interest. It was the amputee party of the year, with so many people from the community coming together to celebrate.

Spare Parts was the most amazing celebration of prosthetics

I could ever have dreamed of. To me, a prosthetic leg is a normal part of life, and I feel so proud to have bought them into the lives of so many others for the first time.

During the exhibition I celebrated my fifth year of being an amputee. Each year my friends and I go out to dinner in memory of my old leg. I was born without a fibula bone and had my ankle fused when I was a quite young. My right leg was very thin, and my foot was tiny and tilted forward. I was 24 and living in pain in Tokyo when I decided it was time. My orthopaedic surgeon had wanted to amputate since I was a little girl but my Mum always said that it would be my decision if and when I ever wanted to. I was 26 when I finally had surgery, and it was the best decision I have ever made. There were some very difficult moments learning how to walk, it took me much longer than I had anticipated. But now I can run, I box, I travel and most importantly – live a life free of pain and full of possibilities.

My latest prosthetic is red with white polka dots. I was at my clinic for a fitting one day and was asked what colour I'd like my new leg to be. I had already decided to skip the cosmetics and go for plain and lightweight to see if it would help with my running. Originally I was thinking about black, that it would be something different and fun. There was a little girl who was about five years old also getting a new leg and she was pretty excited to tell everyone she wanted a Dora The Explorer leg! I was so inspired by this

little girl that I decided to halt the black, and I got some polka dot fabric instead.

Having a polka dot leg is so much fun, I love the look on kid's faces, especially little girls who look at their own polka dot dress, then my leg – and are lost for words. They aren't thinking "that lady has a fake leg" they are thinking "oh my god that lady has a polka dot leg!"

I have always been a believer in stump pride, looking after yourself and treating your stump with lots of TLC. After having a polka dot leg I have added prosthetic pride to the list as well. Sure I love my other leg that has skinergy and I can wear it and blend in completely. But there is something very refreshing about putting on my leg and a matching scarf and walking out the door feeling great!

www.spareparts2012.com

First Published 2010
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