

Ralph Williams Case Study

'Just like that!' and then a moment of silence follows while I try and digest what I just heard.

It takes me a couple of seconds to realise that Ralph, the floor-foreman who I am talking to, was employed on the spot, just like that.

I owe my friends a lot

Ralph had contracted polio when he was three years old and emerged from a long coma without the use of his legs. When he got his first wheelchair, at fifteen, he actually had no idea what a wheelchair looked like. He now deeply appreciates the role his friends played in his early years. At the time they welcomed him as a peer and supported his efforts to do things independently. He recalls with a grin how he played soccer with his friends and using his hands to punch the ball. Today he reflects that the fact that his friends never teased or broke him down laid a foundation in his mind to believe that he could do everything everybody else does. This is remarkable as the environment in South Africa at the time was not very supportive to people living with disabilities. Ralph did not have the benefit of a formal childhood education. He did not have access to a school for children with disabilities. He taught himself how to read, from magazines and TV and after his marriage his wife had further helped him with his literacy.

As Ralph speaks, his wheelchair rolls around comfortably. Especially when he talks about the Shonaquip company. It is hard to describe Ralph without using the word beaming in some way. I share an anecdote about a client doing well and Ralph laughs raucously with pure joy. People around Ralph often share with him the fact that, with his attitude and smile, he does not seem like a typical person in a wheelchair. They would also comment on the fact that him and his wife make such a lovely couple. He admits that comments like this motivate him a lot.

His gestures and passion are contagious and I feel strangely abnormal, being stuck on my static two legs, propped on a chair, talking to this animated and enthusiastic man. We were in the Shonaquip factory in Wynberg and had hijacked the factory manager's office to record Ralph's story. The working environment is completely integrated as a wheelchair space. I increasingly felt like the odd one out when we moved through the factory rooms and floors to the office. From where we sat we could see what seemed like hundreds of brand new Madiba buggies and other chair bases, on the warehouse floor, just waiting to be fitted to their new owners.

The one opportunity I needed...

'You know, if it is up to me, I will *never* leave this company' Ralph beams. 'They gave me the one chance I needed and I will not waste it.' With neither the use of his legs nor a Matric diploma he was not very employable in the conventional job market. Ralph shares how frustrated and depressed he felt. His main challenge was his inability to contribute to his household. He has a son and wanted to share the burden of carrying the household expenses with his wife. He points out that his wife had never blamed him for not contributing, but he nevertheless felt that he should. He also believed that as a man he should offer more support to his family.

He had met the owner of Shonaquip, Shona McDonald, at a fundraising fun-run in aid of the Chaeli Campaign. This organisation is a partner of Shonaquip: they provide wheelchairs to children that need them, and get most of their wheelchairs from Shonaquip. At the fun-run Ralph was a member of a relay team taking part in the event. Afterwards, when everyone was packing up, Shona was pointed out to him as the owner of Shonaquip. Ralph took the initiative, approached Shona, explained his situation and asked her if he could do some odd job in her company. He was willing to sweep the floor or clear the rubbish. Her response was the simple statement: just come in tomorrow. That was it, just like that! Shona had seen something in Ralph, in the first few moments they had met. It looks like it was a wise choice as it led to him being a foreman in the Shonaquip factory just over fourteen years later.

I did quite well in basketball

Ralph regards himself as privileged. He often works from specifications for chairs that are much more specified and detailed than his self-propelled chair. He shares that when he works on these specified chairs for clients he feels grateful that he has such mobility. 'Ninety percent of things I need to do I can do myself.' He shares some of his achievements and I get the sense that if ever there was an enabled person it was Ralph.

In Ralph's story he glosses over the importance of basketball in his life. He presents it as if it was something that he just began doing to keep busy, kind of as an enjoyable hobby. 'I was hanging out at home all the time. To keep busy and deal with my frustration at not doing anything I started to play basketball'. I catch myself thinking that if more people dealt with their frustration in the way Ralph did, our world would be very different. 'I believe when you get an opportunity you try, you give it your all, and when you fail at least you can say – I tried.'

Quite well in basketball in translation means that Ralph represented South Africa at the highest level across the world, amongst others at the Paralympic games in 2000 in Sydney and 2008 in Beijing. He mentions the 'couple of world championships' he has been to in the manner one would list your favourite takeaways in Wynberg: 'I went to Japan, Australia, Canada, I've been playing basketball for about nineteen years now.'

The best disability support company in the world

Ralph is convinced that he will never work for another company. He can easily see himself living out the rest of his life working for this company. He mentions that when Shona looks at someone she has an amazing ability to see right through to the potential they carry. The hand that Shona had extended to him had been the single most meaningful turning point in his life and he believes that Shonaquip plays a similarly meaningful role in many other people's lives. In Ralph I encounter the familiar unforgiving commitment of Shonaquip: the dedication to make each and every chair perfect for its owner, and to sustain that perfection. This striving for a perfect and sustained tailoring to the needs of the client seems to be passionately upheld by every staff member. Ralph has no doubt that Shonaquip will become the best disability support company in the world within the next decade.

I comment on the fact that Ralph has achieved much more than many people who are not in a wheelchair and his reply is without hesitation: 'It's the human spirit. If you have the human spirit, you can go far. I believe in that.'

After meeting Ralph Williams, so do I.