

# everybody has a story

gough, 35, is a legally blind filmmaker.

AS TOLD TO LUCY CORRY

I'm legally blind. In Australia, that means I only have a certain percentage of vision. I can't see at all out of my right eye and have very limited vision in my left. I lost my eyesight when I was just a few weeks old, after a bad reaction to a whooping cough immunisation. It caused a haemorrhagic stroke, which is like a brain haemorrhage. Obviously I can't remember any of it, but I was in hospital for a while and needed a few blood transfusions to get me through. I had quite a few health problems as a child, but the only one that stuck was the lack of eyesight.

I was always keen on storytelling when I was a young kid, as well as writing books and plays. After I finished year 12, I had two jobs – at night I toured as a stand-up comedian, and in the daytime I worked at a radio station as a commercial and promo producer. That was great training for film, because I was writing and performing at night, then editing audio and directing voice talent all day long. Eventually I had some scripts and wanted to get them made, but no one would give me a go because I was blind. I thought, "Well, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to have to do it myself." So I started up Beernuts Productions in 2006, and got busy making my films. As far as I know, I'm the first legally blind person in the world to write, produce, edit, direct and star in a feature film. I would have done the catering, too, but I'm a terrible cook.

You don't need your eyesight to appreciate a great film and great acting. Film is not as visual as people might think. *Pulp Fiction* is a good example: that movie is brilliant because of the dialogue. When it comes to horror films, what makes you jump isn't what

you see – it's what you don't see. It's the way it makes you feel; the sounds and music you hear. A lot of people misunderstand that. They think that because you go to the cinema and watch a screen, it's purely a visual thing, but all your senses are being stimulated.

When it comes to my work, it's kind of good I can't see everything, because it means I'm not distracted by things that don't matter. It took a while to find a good crew of people who understood and appreciated what I was trying to do. I've got people looking out for continuity, so while we're shooting, I'm just focusing on the actors delivering my lines the way I want them to. A lot of directors interfere and want to be a control freak, but I let the people I hire do their jobs. That's what I'm paying them for. I just focus on what needs to be focused on. When I edit a film, it's like one big radio play for me. I edit by audio, so working in radio was a great experience.

I'm lucky that technology allows me to do what I do. My computer speaks to me, so when I'm writing, it will read things out. My phone has some great accessibility features, too. My business model relies on me uploading films to my website and getting people to download them – 15 years ago that wouldn't have been an option, because the technology didn't exist. When it comes to interacting with people, I get my cues verbally. I'm pretty good at picking up on what a person is saying by their tones, their inflections and their inferences – but I have no idea when it comes to body language. I actually think that has helped me quite a lot in my writing, because I've spent a lifetime listening to people. It makes my characters and dialogue stronger, because I'm not distracted by physical appearance.



It took me a while to feel good about myself. For a time, I was quite angry, because discrimination is alive and well, and when you're discriminated against, it causes a level of depression. When it came to my education, people with disabilities were segregated from the rest of the school and not given the same opportunities, through no fault of their own. I wasn't allowed to sit exams, so I couldn't graduate. I wasn't allowed to participate in physical education classes. My school wouldn't provide audiobooks and then failed me on the English curriculum. I know I could have done all those things, but I wasn't given the chance. Discriminating against someone because they have a disability is no different to discriminating against them for their race or their sexuality. It's terrible behaviour.

Ultimately, it's about a lack of education and knowledge. I honestly don't believe people mean to be mean. I call it unintentional ignorance. The great news is that ignorance is a curable disease, and it's a really easy thing to fix. We're all made of the same stuff – a black guy is the same as a white guy, and a gay guy is the same as a straight guy. I'm the same as you – the only difference is that I can't see and you can. It's pretty simple stuff, but when people don't know something, their initial reaction is to be afraid of it.

It took me a long time to understand that, and it also took me a long time to realise that if you want to do something, it's up to you to get busy doing it. I knew what I wanted to do with my life. If people didn't want to support me, that was their choice.

There were probably two defining moments that helped me get there. Firstly, I saw a really good psychologist, because I was struggling badly and needed assistance. She gave me a good talking to, in a very calm and reasoned way, which is probably what I needed. She made me realise that playing the victim wouldn't help me, either – you have to be the champion of your own life. The other thing that really helped was going to see an Australian movie called *2:37*. It was very hard to watch, because it shows someone committing suicide, but it really moved me. I went home and did as much research about it as I could. When I found out the guy who made it was 24, I thought, "Hang on, I'm 24. If he can do it, I can do it." That gave me the kick up the bum I needed. It was a really big moment for me.

Blind people are exactly the same as everyone else. I live a very regular life – I'm mad for all sport; I love going to the movies; I'm a total comedy nerd. I don't feel like being blind affects what I do. There are some things I require assistance with, and I'm not going to be a pro skateboarder any time soon, but I'm cool with that. My disability is a part of me, but it doesn't define who I am. Last week I was talking to the lady who does all the make-up on my films and she said, "Just out of curiosity, where do you want to take all this?" I told her I want to make as many films and entertain as many people as I can; that I wouldn't be happy until every one of the seven billion people on Earth had seen my films. I figure, if you don't set your sights high, you'll never get anywhere. ❀