



This transcript of VALID's Podcast, an interview with John McKenna and Robert Martin, has been provided by Deakin University for educational purposes.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Welcome to the Valid podcast. I'm John McKenna. You're about to listen to a conversation ahead with Robert Martin, who is over from New Zealand attending the 20th anniversary of the valid having a say conference, which took place in February 2019. Robert is the first person with an intellectual disability to sit on a United Nations committee. His role on the United Nations committee is to monitor state parties implementation of the convention for the rights of people with disabilities. Robert led the change to close institutions in New Zealand and took the fight all around the world. In recognition of Robert's achievements, Valid sponsors the annual Robert Martin Award.

As a person with a disability myself, this is one of those great conversations where there is real mutual understanding with looking at the past, present, and future of the disability world. By the way, this interview goes for about 25 minutes.

You're listening to the Valid podcast. My name is John McKenna, and I'm talking with Robert Martin. Hey, Robert, how you going?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Good, thanks.

JOHN MCKENNA:

That's good. Robert, you've got a really large bio. What do we need to know about you?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Well, in 2006, I was made a member of...order of...member of New Zealand order of merit.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK, and you obviously, Australia, you've been to Australia a few times.

ROBERT MARTIN:



No, I've been through three probably, I can't even count the times on my fingers. I've been to Australia that many times, yes.

JOHN MCKENNA:

You're well known disability sector, but for those people that are no familiar with disability, you're a gentleman with an intellectual disability yourself.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yes, that's right.

JOHN MCKENNA:

And I think the world, a lot of people admire your presence on the United Nations committee. And what's your role there?

ROBERT MARTIN:

My role is to read the government reports, but also civil society reports, and they're often done easy to understand language, so I can understand. Because as you know, the language in the UN is pretty hard to understand.

JOHN MCKENNA:

I think the key thing is you represent people with intellectual disabilities on that committee. What is fascinating, and I'd be interested to hear your thoughts, on that committee, how do you know people to your work? What makes you feel good that you're being listened to?

ROBERT MARTIN:

When people answer my questions. There have been several times when I first found that people didn't even acknowledge my questions that I asked. But now, I've been on...this is my third year. Now, I think people understand where I come from.

JOHN MCKENNA:

That's great. Is it one of those things, the more they get to know you, the more respect you have?

ROBERT MARTIN:



Yes.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Is that fair to say that?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yeah, is it fair to say that, yeah.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Sure.

ROBERT MARTIN:

'Cause I mean, I haven't got a PhD or I'm not a lawyer or any of those things. Where I come from, is living the life of a person with a disability, and that's what I bring to the committee.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Sure, and that's something you can't learn, is it? That's something that comes inside.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep, that's something that comes naturally.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yeah, and I guess I talked to you as another person with a physical disability, and I exactly get what you mean. Sadly, there can be tokenistic representations where we are just on a committee 'cause it's good to have someone with a disability. But when people listen to us, it's great.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Well, I think it's been good for the other committee members.

JOHN MCKENNA:

For sure.



ROBERT MARTIN:

And I think that's been a real learning experience for both sides. And I think, you know, I do bring, you know, the deinstitutionalisation, also the whole thing about the work and workshops that, you know, that I think we should get rid of 'cause I think we should get rid of because they are past the point of (INAUDIBLE). And I think we need to do something more, I don't know, out there and be more, you know, trying to actually do new things for people, instead of actually doing the same old, same old, same old because we know it doesn't work, so why do we still do it?

JOHN MCKENNA:

That's right, and we're talking about shelter employment that's what...

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep, yep, yep.

JOHN MCKENNA:

And I agree totally, something that we need to be made aware of. Any stories that you're proud to share that with your role you've been able to make change when you look back, that it was like this, but now you starting to see changes?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Well, it's really good when countries bring people with intellectual disabilities to Geneva 'cause that means we can talk to them.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK, which country stands out in your mind doing that?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Oh, well, Canada brought some people out.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.



ROBERT MARTIN:

And Great Britain did but also I told them a few home truths as well about, you know, what they're doing and what they shouldn't be doing.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yeah.

ROBERT MARTIN:

As far as people with disabilities are concerned

JOHN MCKENNA:

How do they respond? You tell them what they should be doing. Are they shocked, or they say?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Well, they answered a couple of my questions, but they didn't answer the one about Article 12.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Article 12, what's that about?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Supportive decision making and guardianship.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

And I think we should get rid of guardianship.

JOHN MCKENNA:

So I think I've heard you say before, was that in the too-hard-basket for them?



ROBERT MARTIN:

Yeah, I think there's been quite a few countries too-hard-baskets because I think that that's one of the things that a lot of the countries didn't sign up too is Article 12.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Interesting.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yes.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Has England signed up to that?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yeah, yeah there's quite a few countries that now have signed up to it. Except there's one country that's actually that's actually got rid of guardianship.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Peru.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yeah, so sounds like Peru quite active in this area?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yes.

JOHN MCKENNA:



That's good. So we talked about guardianship and we talked about deinstitutionalisation with regards to employment, no doubt, I guess you've seen people around the world who are very proud to be working.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yes, yes, they are.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Any stories that you could share with us, people you've met?

ROBERT MARTIN:

I think there's still in a lot of countries around the world that probably are just, you know, taking (INAUDIBLE), as it were.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

A lot of people with some types of disabilities are still unemployed, and often, they say they're unemployable, but I would take exception to that. I think everyone's employable. It just means that we need to assist people more to be able to work in the community. And you know, I think the other one goes with that, it goes hand in hand, is education.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yes.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Education goes hand in hand with jobs.

JOHN MCKENNA:

It does.

ROBERT MARTIN:



And you know, I do not like special education, and I make no...I also think that I do not like it.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Special education?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yeah, because I think it sets up everybody to fail.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yes.

ROBERT MARTIN:

I think, also, we tend to put people in baskets.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yes.

ROBERT MARTIN:

And they don't belong in baskets.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yes.

ROBERT MARTIN:

I think we use the word special, and I think special was a word that...when that's used in a nondisabled, it has a different meaning to when it is used in the disability sector. And to me, I remember talking to UNICEF, and I remember UNICEF saying, "Oh, the special people." You know, as if we're something from another planet, or something.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yeah.



ROBERT MARTIN:

And to me, there's nothing special about being special.

JOHN MCKENNA:

(LAUGHS) I like that.

ROBERT MARTIN:

And you know, the thing that's also, there's no special jobs when you come out of school. There's no special communities when you live in the community, and there's no special societies. So why do we have special?

JOHN MCKENNA:

That's right. Who created that word? The special is when you go to a restaurant and get something cheap

ROBERT MARTIN:

Well, I mean, it's really interesting because all the words that we have used have used in the disability sector have come from professional people.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Exactly, and that actually leads me to our next question. Whilst respecting the need for qualified, trained people, do you believe sometimes that can become a barrier?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yes, I reckon people like you and I should be part of the training mechanism.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Sure.

ROBERT MARTIN:

'Cause we live with our disability every day.

JOHN MCKENNA:



Yes.

ROBERT MARTIN:

We know what it's like. We don't need people to tell us to suck eggs.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yep.

ROBERT MARTIN:

We already know how to suck them.

JOHN MCKENNA:

For sure.

ROBERT MARTIN:

And I think that, to me, is we've gotta be part of the training because we understand people with disabilities. You know, I'm sure you've been there a long time. I've been there for 60 years.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Sure.

ROBERT MARTIN:

You know, it was just the baby growing up in the museum and being institutionalised.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

You know, that's...

JOHN MCKENNA:



How long were you institution for?

ROBERT MARTIN:

15 years, and then another 15 years in services so...

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

So you know, for me...I think for me, a learning curve, 'cause I've experienced all those kind of things that come with it. You know, sheltered workshops, people having control over our lives, you know, what to buy, offering you clothes, you know, not the clothes we would have picked, others picked. You know, being not able to pick what you want for breakfast or tea or the right to privacy.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Sure.

ROBERT MARTIN:

When someone comes in knocking on your bedroom door and throwing the cat out the window, you know? I mean, that's...

JOHN MCKENNA:

That happened, did it?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Where was that?

ROBERT MARTIN:

In the town I lived in.



JOHN MCKENNA:

Yes.

ROBERT MARTIN:

So.

JOHN MCKENNA:

What happened?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Of course, I...

ROBERT MARTIN:

(INAUDIBLE) think was wrong.

JOHN MCKENNA:

So you had a cat?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep, yeah.

JOHN MCKENNA:

And then, threw it out?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Well, I feared that one day, yeah, it was on my beach. Like, but I mean, I think also you wouldn't allow no pits, cause his idea was, well, we got a (INAUDIBLE) You can't think for yourselves. So why should you, you know, a pit? And the other thing that I did years ago was cause a strike.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Tell us about that.



ROBERT MARTIN:

Well basically, one of the other(INAUDIBLE) came to me and said, I've got a problem, what can we do? I says, oh, we could have a strike. He says, what's that? I says, when you turn up for work, but you don't do any work.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

So we went to work the next day.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yep.

ROBERT MARTIN:

And all the other workers picked up shovels and (INAUDIBLE). We're not working today. And they kind of looked at me, and in five minutes, told us to go to work. I says, we on strike today, we're not going to work.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

And he called the big boss, and they told us to go back to work, and nope.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

So we spent all day talking about the issues that this person had.

JOHN MCKENNA:



OK, that's great. What about-

ROBERT MARTIN:

I mean, that was my first time, you know, into that kind of stuff. But we've done other things as well. The woman did it after us as well, so. I mean, it's never been done before, and we (INAUDIBLE) Parliament to close our last institution down, and that was never been done before by people,(INAUDIBLE)

JOHN MCKENNA:

What was that institution that closed.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Kimberly. That was the biggest, it was the biggest of its time.

JOHN MCKENNA:

In New Zealand?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Well, in New Zealand, yeah.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK, and that was a workshop, or?

ROBERT MARTIN:

No, it was actually a institution for people of intellectual disability. It was about 12 to 1,400 people.

JOHN MCKENNA:

A combination, was it?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep, yep.

JOHN MCKENNA:



OK. You were heavily involved in it?

ROBERT MARTIN:

The close, or?

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yep.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yes.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

A lot of people, those that came from New as well.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Looking back on that, Robert, who was the main reason said, no you can't do it, was it parents, was it professionals?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yeah, it was parents.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Because they saw this place of addiction, and I mean, you gotta level on the bright side to know the workings of it, you know, the absolute hell hole.

JOHN MCKENNA:



Sure.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Especially people who don't live lives, or talk. I mean, most of the day, they've just been lying around. I could get out, run around, and get into mischief, and all that kind of thing. But for a lot of people, they couldn't do that.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Sure. So, you talk about parents. It's a very hard topic, isn't it, because.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Oh, it is a hard topic.

JOHN MCKENNA:

There is a natural thing, to be a parent, but, what do you say, parents listening to say, what do you tell them to allow their child to.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Well, I just say, you know, you've gotta move on.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yep.

ROBERT MARTIN:

You know, it's no use sitting in a stinking hole, and be nervous, and get (INAUDIBLE). You know, I think we need to move on. I don't blame the parents for what happened, I blame the system.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yes.

ROBERT MARTIN:



I blame the system. The system was wrong, and it's still wrong today. You know, I mean we talk about deinstitutionalization, but are we really deinstitutionalization, or are we reinstitutionalization. In effect, we are (INAUDIBLE), it's not bricks and mortar.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

That make institutions, it's the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others that make it so.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Exactly. Yeah, so I heard you talk a couple days ago about the word enablement.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep.

JOHN MCKENNA:

To enable people. Tell us a bit more about that word, what does that word mean to you, to enable?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Well, (INAUDIBLE) to enable people, they do the things that they want to achieve in life. You know, have an education, to have a little job, to make sure you have a house where we actually choose where we live, and choose the people that we want to live with us, and not have other people do that for us. And to be, you know, people talk about special, but I think that should be uniqueness. I think we're all unique, we're all, come in the world with nothing, but we all have some of us behind.

JOHN MCKENNA:

For sure. Yeah. And I think what we talk about now is different words, like enable.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yeah.



JOHN MCKENNA:

And there is a bit of a culture around, should the word care or support. For me personally, (INAUDIBLE). I like the word enable. Don't support me, enable me please.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep, yep.

JOHN MCKENNA:

And people have said, on different conversations, you know I've had over the years, and I think last night or the day before, you talked about pathways.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep.

JOHN MCKENNA:

About creating a pathway.

ROBERT MARTIN:

And I think we gotta create a pathway for people, so.

JOHN MCKENNA:

What's that look like, how do you create a pathway? If you've got a person with a disability listening to you right now, what advice do you give their mind? How do you create that pathway?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Well, I think it starts as a child, of course, where we support the family. To actually make good decisions on behalf of the child, but also the child is part of the decision making process as well. And they get to go to school, where the assistance is put in place.(INAUDIBLE)

JOHN MCKENNA:

Right.



ROBERT MARTIN:

Youngin needs assistance. Because it is about assistance. We all need assistance in some way. But I think support has been used to smother.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yes.

ROBERT MARTIN:

That's what I call it, smother people.

JOHN MCKENNA:

For sure.

ROBERT MARTIN:

No, that we don't let people grow, and we don't let people fall over. It's a natural thing. You know, and you get back on the horse. And I'm sure you've heard that.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Exactly.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Saying before.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Get kicked off, get back on it?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yeah. And I think that's where it starts from, it starts from a child, where people learn to see you as part or parts of society. And then that grows into, you know, teenager hood, you know, do the stuff that other teenagers do, and get into mischief, and all that kind of stuff. You know, having a real job, and being



respected for what you bring to society, and what you bring to your local community. That, to me, is, you know, you can't get away from people.

JOHN MCKENNA:

(INAUDIBLE) Robert, you're known as a very powerful self advocate, which is great. What keeps you going. And what I'm getting at you here is, obviously you gotta be hearing some good stories, that make you feel good, that's why you keep doing it?

ROBERT MARTIN:

(INAUDIBLE)

JOHN MCKENNA:

Say that again?

ROBERT MARTIN:

it's coming here.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Having a say conference?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep, yep. To me it's just tremendous to see people coming through the system, and people learning about leadership, and learning about, you know, empowerment, and all those things that you cannot take away from another human being. But we often have in the past, but when people come here, you feel that you want a surefire run. That, to me, is a great aspect of this.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Right.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Coming together. You know, we can talk about things that are really important to us. You know, some things are hurtful.



JOHN MCKENNA:

Yes.

ROBERT MARTIN:

You know, like abuse, and even institutionalization. Even (INAUDIBLE). You know, all those things are what we did to people. What we did. Now we gotta actually turn it around, and what we can actually help people. Not (INAUDIBLE) people, at people.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Is it fair to say, first step is to acknowledge what we have been doing?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep, I think so, it is.

JOHN MCKENNA:

And now, we go forward?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep, like New Zealanders is doing an apology. I actually got the idea from Australia, when Australia apologized to the-

JOHN MCKENNA:

Indigenous.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Local, indigenous people. And I said it was about time that the government actually apologized for all the wrongs they did to people with disabilities, in the locking them away, and that situations, and, you know, boys homes, and wards of the state. You know, sometimes church organizations. All those, and me just want an apology for the past wrongs. Because, I mean, let's face it. A lot of people my age, we're not educated.

JOHN MCKENNA:



Sure.

ROBERT MARTIN:

You know, and I hear time and time again from the older generationers, what would have happened if I'd had been educated?

JOHN MCKENNA:

So, going back to the apology, where is that at the moment, has that happened, or?

ROBERT MARTIN:

No, it hasn't happened yet, but you know, we're actually working on it.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK. At what level? So you, there's a few people talking to other people, or is the government listening to this?

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yes. Well, I actually been putting out to get them as well, and we've got the(INAUDIBLE) involved as well, yes.

JOHN MCKENNA:

I agree with you, 'cause if you, going back what happened in indigenous community, it did take our Prime Minister to say sorry. That was, I saw, look at media, people just smiled to say, at least it's been acknowledged. So, we know we can't fix it.

ROBERT MARTIN:

No, well, it's never gonna be. You can't take away what's been done.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Exactly.

ROBERT MARTIN:



But what we can do is acknowledge it. And that's the first step, isn't it?

JOHN MCKENNA:

Indeed. Robert, I've really enjoyed talking to you. Thank you for coming up to the Valid Podcast. And no doubt, we'll meet again.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Yep, thank you.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ROBERT MARTIN:

Thanks so much.

SPEAKER:

We hope you enjoyed the Valid Podcast. For more details about Valid, please have a look at our website, www.valid.org.au.