

Creating change

A Year in Review 2019–20



A message from the **Chair**

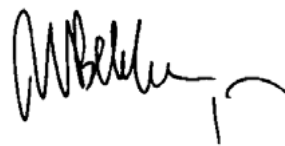
As for all organisations, 2019-20 was a year of significant challenges for Amaze, with changes imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic affecting our operations and income dramatically from March 2020 onwards.

The whole staff rose to the challenges admirably, and the transition to remote and online operations went remarkably smoothly. We were also grateful to the Federal and State Governments for the substantial pandemic assistance they provided, which helped us significantly to remain financially robust throughout the crisis.

The year was transformational for Amaze, as we began implementing

our first national venture, Autism Connect, expanded our advocacy activities, notably on behalf of the Australian Autism Alliance, and launched our TV advertising campaign to lift autism understanding. We also moved to modern and much more adequate office premises in Richmond, which we hope to make use of now the pandemic restrictions have eased.

Additionally, we had a year of very generous support from donors and our partner organisations, and on behalf of the Board I would like to thank all of them: these gifts greatly help us in our mission to increase public understanding of autism and enhance educational and career opportunities for autistic people.



Professor Warren Bebbington AM
Board Chair



A message from the **CEO**

When we first conceived the *Strategic Directions to 2040* plan in 2015, I set a personal goal - to expand our autism information service nationally. In late 2019 that goal was achieved when Amaze was awarded a grant from the NDIA to deliver Australia's first national autism helpline.

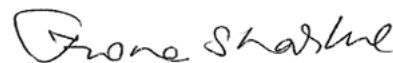
A second major highlight for me was delivering Australia's first mass media autism public education campaign - *Change Your Reactions*, developed by Amaze in consultation with 200 autistic people and their families. Featuring autistic actors and authentic, real experiences of autistic people, it challenged the community to consider their attitudes and behaviours towards autistic people and make changes. Response to the campaign was overwhelmingly positive by both the general

community and autistic people and their families. Autistic people feel validated, some even seeing a change in reactions in public. I am immensely proud.

This year, I have been impressed by the strength of the Amaze community in dealing with the impact of a pandemic. It has not been easy. I recognise the remarkable efforts made to get through this extraordinarily difficult time.

It was our privilege during this time to hear directly from autistic people and their families. Thank you. You trusted Amaze to share your experiences, and we never stopped elevating them to government decision makers. Together, we worked for positive changes in difficult times.

Thank you also to those who supported Amaze as donors, partners, peers and colleagues. We could not do our work without you.

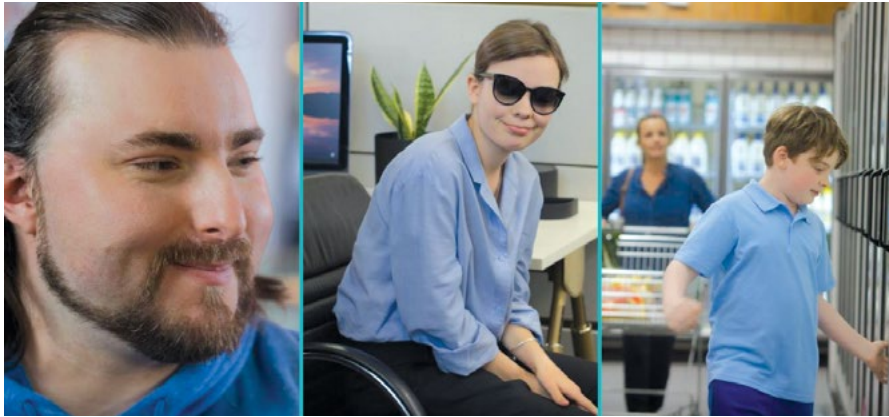


Fiona Sharkie
Amaze CEO



Outcome 1:

Build understanding of autism in the wider world



Ryan New, Chloe Hayden and Oscar Harrison in Change Your Reactions campaign



Leanne Haynes and son in ABC News online

Change Your Reactions: Australia's first autism mass media public education campaign

In February, *Change Your Reactions* premiered on TV, radio and online. It reached millions of Victorians with a message of understanding and acceptance. Developed by Amaze, with autistic people and the wider community, *Change Your Reactions* featured autistic actors in real-life situations.

The response has been remarkable. A Facebook post from Premier Daniel Andrews has been viewed 1.3 million times. Autistic people online commented about feeling pride and validation. The campaign was funded by the Victorian Government.

Autism Connect: delivering autism information for all Australians

Misinformation, myths and outdated views about autism are damaging to autistic people and their families. Yet, 95% of people who contact an

Amaze Autism Advisor say they feel listened to and understood, 77% feel more confident about making life choices, 80% better understand supports for autistic people, and 82% better understand their rights as an autistic person.

This year Amaze was awarded NDIA funding to expand the Autism Advisor service. Known as Autism Connect, it is Australia's first national autism helpline, and will operate across the country by mid 2021.

Sharing knowledge through workshops and events

This year, nearly 3000 people attended public events run by Amaze. Topics included young children and autism, school – including the transition to secondary school, raising teenage girls, autism and employment, and navigating the NDIS. Events were held across Victoria, with regional sessions well attended. Amaze revised its

calendar of events during the COVID-19 restrictions and delivered 102 workshops in total. Virtual sessions were very popular, with three times more people attending than for face-to-face sessions, including from regional and interstate areas.

Amaze as a conduit for autistic voices in media and online

Amaze's online community continued to expand through engagement with the eSpectrum newsletter, the new Amaze website launched in July, and social media. This year, Amaze joined Instagram and Twitter. Across all channels there has been an increase in autistic-written content and autistic voices. Amaze has also facilitated autistic voices being heard through media appearances. Highlights included the launch of Amaze's *Change Your Reactions* campaign, and articles about the experiences of autistic students learning from home during coronavirus restrictions.

4,069

people contacted the Advisor service (15% increase)



283k

visitors to the Amaze websites (including Change Your Reactions)

+74%

growth in social media community since 2018

Outcome 2:

Influence systemic change in government, private and social sectors



Amaze CEO Fiona Sharkie and National Disability Insurance Agency CEO Martin Hoffman

Speaking up during a global pandemic

In March 2020, life in Victoria changed dramatically with restrictions to address the threat of COVID-19. These had a huge impact on autistic Victorians, including students learning from home. During lockdown, Amaze continually spoke to government – health and education departments, Ministers, the NDIA – to improve circumstances for autistic people. The Amaze community shared their experiences through surveys, direct contact and in a roundtable with government decision-makers. These valuable insights helped Amaze lobby successfully for changes, including flexibility in how NDIS funds could be spent, and prioritising students with disability in the return to school.

Making mental health a priority

Accessing appropriate support for mental health is an ongoing issue for autistic people in Australia. This year,



Association for Children with a Disability CEO Karen Dimmock, Fiona Sharkie and Parliamentary Secretary for Schools, Tim Richardson

Amaze has been engaged with Victoria's Mental Health Royal Commission. Amaze conducted a significant research study with Different Journeys and Yellow Ladybugs, and together made a joint submission to the Royal Commission. To address one of the identified barriers to accessing mental health support, GPs, Amaze developed a resource to assist autistic women to see their GP about their mental health, the first of its kind.

Shaping the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

Making the NDIS successful for autistic people is a major focus of Amaze's policy and advocacy work. Amaze is on key committees - the NDIA CEO forum and the NDIA Autism Advisory Group to ensure that the experiences of autistic people in the delivery of the Scheme are known to those running the Scheme. This year Amaze made submissions on Participant Services Standards

(the Tune Review), Thin Markets, NDIS Pricing and the ECEI pathway.

Amaze developed a resource to help autistic people with complex support needs navigate the NDIS. This was launched at the VALID Having A Say conference in February.

Towards a national autism strategy

In direct response to advocacy by the Australian Autism Alliance (Amaze is an Alliance partner) the Senate launched an Inquiry into Autism late in 2019. Amaze co-ordinated production of a comprehensive submission on behalf of the Alliance. This was informed by a large-scale autism community survey which attracted almost 4000 responses – over 20% of responses were from autistic people. The Inquiry is a crucial step towards obtaining the Australian Government's commitment to developing a national autism strategy.



5

major policy submissions

17

committees and advisory groups where Amaze provides evidence-based advice

+30

meetings with government to address impact of COVID-19 (March – June 2020)

Outcome 3:

Build the skills of autistic people, their families, and the wider world



Autistic visitors at the Immigration Museum



Rachel McNamara and family 'hoodie up'

Spaces in the wider world being autism friendly

This year, 85 organisations took part in Amaze-led training to improve the way they work with, and welcome, autistic people. This included staff training and 32 environmental audits. Some of those Amaze worked with include Marvel Stadium, Big 4 Holiday Parks, the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, ETU, Victorian Scouts, councils Casey, Wyndham, Hobsons Bay and Hume, and many more. In November Big 4 Holiday Parks launched the first social script for a holiday park in Australia. Amaze also initiated and developed resources to make the return to on-site learning in Term 2 easier for autistic students.

Community Support Team

Amaze's community support team has built a network of people within the Amaze community able to help one another. Within this model, Amaze organised group events and

information sessions in many areas of Victoria. Twelve individuals have been supported to become peer support leaders. The value of the program was demonstrated this year when the wider Victorian community donated funds to keep the program going in Amaze's most successful fundraising campaign yet. Community comments included "an invaluable source of knowledge", "such a great resource", "such a support to our family", "forever grateful, thank you".

Inclusion champions: Museums Victoria

Museums Victoria has become an Amaze Inclusion Champion as part of a five year partnership with Amaze. Melbourne Museum, Scienceworks and the Immigration Museum have all worked with Amaze in becoming autism friendly museums. Social stories and sensory maps have been developed for autistic visitors of all ages, including those within school

groups. The Museums host special quiet days and quiet areas. Melbourne Museum was also the launch venue of Amaze's *Change Your Reactions* campaign.

Growth in engagement with autistic people

Amaze strives to engage autistic people in all areas. This year, Amaze welcomed a new autistic Board member as well as autistic employees in the Autism Advisor service and Communication teams. Amaze consulted with members of the community through the Consumer Advisory Group as well as through Amaze-led surveys, and with regular communication with other autism organisations. In April Amaze celebrated World Autism Acceptance Day and Amaze's *Hoodie Up* campaign remotely with videos and pictures submitted from autistic people and their communities from across Victoria.

+50%

increase in autistic people contacting Autism Advisors



23,400

downloads of Amaze-developed resources

102

public events held
26 delivered online

Committees and advisory groups

Amaze is a member of a number of advisory groups and committees at state and national level. We provide evidence-based advice to influence policy development and research that will create meaningful change for the autism community.

Victoria

Disability Stakeholder Reference Group (Department of Education and Training)

COVID-19 Disability Taskforce (Department of Health and Human Services)

Victorian Autism Education Strategy Advisory Group

COVID-19 Education Advisory Group (DET)

Victorian Autism Plan Advisory Group

Victoria Police Disability Portfolio Reference Group

Victorian's Great Outdoors Program Stakeholder Reference Group (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning)

Disability Friendly Schools Working Group (DET)

Victorian Council of Social Service Empowered Lives Advisory Committee

VCOSS Education Equity Coalition

National

NDIS Autism Advisory Group

NDIS CEO Forum

Australian Autism Alliance

Australian Advisory Board on Autism

Australian Network for Universal Housing Design

Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre Advisory Committee

Amaze is shaping a better future for autism through advocacy, campaigning and supporting autistic people.

Our principles:

- **Autistic people and their families at the centre**
- **Collaboration and partnership**
- **Courage and independence**
- **Evidence-based**



Amaze Inc.

Ground floor, 678 Victoria Street
Richmond VIC 3121
www.amaze.org.au

Phone: 03 9657 1600

Email: info@amaze.org.au

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