RALLYING THE TEAM

Jacob & Mel

Being the first person to complete a rugged road trip in a wheelchair is no mean feat. But good planning, teamwork and true grit won the day!

WORDS: SOPHIE CULLEN

The Shitbox Rally is a road trip that is a famed Aussie event. Many Australians dream of traversing the sandy deserts or cruising along the coastlines of this wide brown land. But not many people put those dreams into action. Fewer still attempt to do so in a two-wheel-drive worth less than $1500. And to date, only one person has done so in a wheelchair and a car with hand controls.

We were stoked to chat with advocate and adventurer Mel Harrison of Sitting Low Reaching High and her teammate and friend Jacob Graham of Access Adventures to compare their takes on the October 2022 Shitbox Rally, a road trip with a twist.

MEL'S SIDE OF THE STORY:

Mel summarises the Shitbox Rally as an event where 250 cars gather to drive in the outback, raising funds for the Cancer Council. The fun part is that the car, which must have two drivers, has to be worth less than $1500 and can't be a 4WD.

"I wanted to do it originally to raise money for the Cancer Council and to raise awareness about disability inclusion," says Mel.

The idea took root, and it soon became about organising the nitty gritty. This included clarifying what access was like at each rally campsite, not to mention sourcing a vehicle that met the criteria and could carry Mel and Jacob from Mackay to Darwin in one piece.

"I bought an old wheelchair accessible taxi," says Mel of her trusty Toyota with 950,000km on the clock. "It was the taxi owned by a mate of mine, in which he used to drive me around back in the day in that car, and 20 years later I was in the car driving!"

Mel was sponsored by Total Ability, who installed hand controls in her car and who she says deserve a big shout-out for their support of her trip.

Mel also considers herself lucky to have been matched with an incredible group. Her team, Breaking Down Barriers, drove the distance with a group of six other cars, a rally rule designed for participant safety.

"I might be the one physically sitting in the chair, but I didn't do it by myself," says Mel. "It was very much the team that got me through. That's why I like the ▸

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Mates breaking down barriers for Mel

DISABILITY INCLUSION IS A BIG PART OF MY 'WHY,'

whole idea of the rally because it is very much like how I see disability... things happen when you've got good support."

The rally took seven days from Mackay in Queensland to Darwin in the Northern Territory, with participants covering between 300 and 550km per day before camping for the night. As you might imagine, such a trip was not without its challenges.

"I didn't know what I'd come across when I came to the next campsite," she says, referring to its accessibility. "Generally when I travel, I will stay in one location for at least a couple of days. This was unusual because I was going to a new place [every day]."

"The biggest challenge for me was that I didn't have anybody to talk to who had done it before in the same way. Now that I've done it, if I did it again, it would be easier because I know what to expect."

This was part of Mel's motivation for participating in the first place: that by being the first rally entrant who uses a wheelchair, she would make it that little bit easier for those who followed suit.

"We have potentially opened up the eyes of other people who have a disability about ways they might be able to do things that they didn't think were necessarily possible. Opening eyes and doors for people is something that I cherish."

JACOB'S SIDE OF THE STORY:

Jacob joined Mel on the rally for a similar reason.

"Disability inclusion is a big part of my 'why,'" he says. As co-founder of Access Adventures, Jacob is no stranger to pushing his own limits and helping other people push theirs. When Mel mentioned the rally, he didn't hesitate.

"[I said] if you want to do this, I'll do everything I can to make it happen... I'm always up for a challenge and I enjoy the

adventure side of things in the disability world," he says.

"From that day, it was about finding out how and what we'd be up against when we got out there."

One of Jacob's main roles leading up to departure was liaising with rally personnel and researching thoroughly so they'd know as best as possible what to expect on the road.

"We came up against a few obstacles but we've done lots of trips before where we've had to navigate all types of inaccessibility," says Jacob. "You just have to have an open mind as there's only a certain amount of research you can do, and then you've got to go with your instinct and find the positive side of any challenge."

Like Mel, Jacob mentioned teaming up with the other drivers in their rally group as the icing on the cake of an incredible trip.

"Being covered in red dirt for seven days and applying more sunscreen than I ever had in my life will stick with me," he jokes, but not as much as "the friendships we have now with those 12 people - not many other people stuck together like we did once the rally had finished."

In terms of memorable moments, the Hell's Gate Roadhouse pit stop in outback Queensland was another top pick for Jacob, who mentioned that bringing tourism and business to small outback towns impacted by COVID was an added bonus of the trip.

"People were super welcoming," he says. "We had a good night there after a long day. There was green grass in the middle of the red desert, music, and a great vibe about it."

Jacob also appreciated the impact the trip had on him and Mel, who were forced to learn many new skills on the fly, including driving for the first time on dirt tracks in Mel's case.

"I always knew Mel was very resilient ▶

"You go to places you wouldn't normally go"

and stubborn," Jacob says. "Her biggest [challenge] was accepting help and, after getting to know the people on the team... it was good watching that unfold. I could feel her struggling and she pushed through and opened herself up a bit to understand that it was totally fine to accept the right help if it comes from a good place, and that it doesn't necessarily detract from the experience."

Jacob considers the fact that Mel holds the title as the only person to complete the rally in a wheelchair as "phenomenal".

"We sprayed champagne over her at the finish line like she was an F1 driver!" he laughs.

Accepting that ups and downs are part and parcel of a trip like theirs, there isn't much Jacob would change about the way he and Mel approached the rally, except perhaps bringing along an extra esky for some cold beers.

"You're trying to do something that's not mainstream," he says, urging anyone considering signing up to the Shitbox Rally to embrace the adventure.

"That's what the Shitbox Rally is all about. You go to places you wouldn't normally go and drive cars you wouldn't normally drive. If they made it a perfect situation then it wouldn't have the draw that it does!"

Mel celebrating on the finish line