**Transcript of interview with Deborah Thomson**

[Deb is a woman with shoulder length brown hair, black framed glasses and is wearing a black long sleeve top. She is sitting in her kitchen which has a wooden shelf behind her with glassware of various colours, sizes and shapes. There is a telescope to the left of the screen by a window with venetian blinds]

Hi, my name is Deborah Thomson. I am an advocate for Engender Equality, a not-for-profit organisation here in Tasmania. They look after women who have been abused who experience family violence. I also advocate for women and I live in Burnie, Tasmania on a beautiful part of the coast. I advocate mainly for women because I think family violence is a gendered issue with the majority of victims being female and perpetrators being male. That holds out statistically, so can’t argue.

The reason I started advocating was, after I had written my first book about my experience with abuse and Engender Equality got in touch with me. Alina Thomas, the CEO, said ‘how would you like to train to be an advocate? So that is how I began the advocacy journey with family violence, but I found as I read more and more about disability (and I myself have become physically disabled), I find disability issues aren’t talked about enough.

There is so many things to talk about family violence, but I have only recently found out that the disabled are the biggest cohort experiencing family violence from their partners who too often are their carers as well, and they suffer abuse at even higher rates than the Indigenous. I was quite surprised about that. Being disabled too there are so many problems with that, females in particular aren’t believed when they disclose. Their disclosures of abuse are either diminished or dismissed or ignored. They have trouble reaching out to people purely because of physical or mental disability, and this is why I started speaking out about abuse in the disabled context as well.

Since writing my first book I just found that people can relate to what I have said in the book, and I have just taken it from there and spoken out. Even though I am disabled, I have so much support and that is helping me speak up.

I wouldn’t call myself a leader, but I think if you want to speak out about abuse and disability issues you really need that support wrapped around you. Good people that you can trust and talk to. I am just speaking out and hopefully encouraging a lot more people to come and out about abuse and the issues around that and just to help society understand what we are going through, what abuse looks like, particularly coercive control, which is a really subtle form of abuse, and it can be ignored in a relationship. The more I speak and encourage others we get a ground swell of people speaking out and encouraging those that haven’t come forward yet, hey its quite alright to come out and speak. We are not going to blame you or stigmatise you. You are safe.

The thing that I am really really chuffed about is four or five of us, a core group, have been pushing the government to make non-fatal strangulation a stand-alone offence. As it stood before it was just part of common assault, so perpetrators weren’t answering to what is an extremely violent form of abuse and it leads to homicide, more often than not. We have been advocating for law reform in that area and it has just been announced that it will be legislated in a years’ time, but it is going to happen. This has been years in the making. That has come from writing the first book and meeting a lot of amazing women in Tasmania. Just through meeting these women - Alina Thomas, Yvette Cehtel from the Womens Legal Centre, Elise Whitmore and even Ruth Forrest from the Legislative Council. These people just want to make a difference in Tasmania and I am right on board with that positive change.

The first book was ‘Whose Life Is It Anyway?: Recognising and Surviving Domestic Violence’. The second book, which is just coming out now is ‘Whose Life is It Anyway: Leaving a Violent Abuser’ is a sequel to the first book. The first one was about the relationship I was in. The second one is more about how I left, after leaving and going through the Family Law Court. In the book I talk a lot about that, what needs to be changed within the Family Law Court system. I don’t want to dismantle it entirely, just there needs to be a few things changed where the Court no longer looks at women (and again I will make this a gendered issue because it is mother mainly), mother going through the court vilified when they speak of domestic violence and more often than not the abuse is not taken seriously in matters in Court because their current thought is 50:50 access and custody for fathers and mothers regardless of whether one of the parents is abusive. This has to change. I finished Court in 2009 but speaking to other women nothing much has changed. It is still that culture in Family Court where the abused parent brings it up in Court and it is either dismissed or disbelieved or just the Judge will say it really doesn’t have bearing on this matter, that the father needs to see the child as much as the mother does. The abuse is not taken seriously. It has to change. What I am saying is backed by just about every Women’s Legal Centre and domestic violence service, through all saying the same things. That is what I am hoping the second book will do – just highlight the problems and where do we go from here.

From my experience I would just say that it is really important to be in that space where you feel you are mentally capable of speaking out because when I first left the abuse I was trying in public. I couldn’t speak to anyone other than my family. I was really insular and mentally incapable of making any sense. So, I think you need to just go inward and look at how you feel, just imagine speaking out to people, how do you feel about that? Does it make you feel uncomfortable or are you feeling really free to speak out? It took me a lot of years before I came to that spot, and again that support around me also encouraged me.

I found that speaking to people with disability, that a lot of the time even though they are starting to speak about their experience, aren’t being listened to. A good friend of mine, Tess Moodie, who is the coordinator for Engender, was just saying to me that firstly the disabled need to know their rights and then others who are listening need to understand that any decisions made, any policy making, anything to do with the disabled, a disabled person needs to be first and foremost in collaboration with others who are speaking about disability that don’t experience it. A disabled person needs to be in the middle of that decision making. I just want to really talk about that because it is just not happening, more often than not. We are talking about making changes to policies and so on, but the actual person with the disability isn’t being engaged with that process making and policy making.

I would like to plug this book (holds up a book titled ‘Growing Up Disabled in Australia’) it is edited by Carly Findlay, who is a person with disability. My daughter bought it for me and I just love the book. It came out this year – ‘Growing Up Disabled in Australia’. There are a lot of stories from people with disability and talking about leadership, these people in this book have just reached a point where they have accepted their disability, no matter how much pain they are in and how much their disability might limit them in a ‘normal’ life they have come through that and loved their life. They find meaning as I did, like I was talking about earlier. It’s just a lovely book but it also talks about how we want to be treated as people with disability. They are not afraid to say what they don’t like from able-bodied people and I really enjoyed the book.

This one is my second book [Deb holds up her second book] and my mum (who is sitting over there and probably doesn’t want to be filmed) contributed a lot to the book. A lot of what happened after what I left the abuser I had either repressed or forgotten so Mum’s diary entries were invaluable. This one is just coming out now.

[closing footage of Deb smiling]