

THE SWITCH

From health to the arts

For Meredith Potts, a love of music has both helped and hindered her career choices.

"I started music lessons when I was four and had always been involved in singing and music through school," she says. "When I left school I decided not to pursue music as a performer but wanted to align my interests with that."

Potts decided to become a speech pathologist.

"It meant I could learn about the voice and what made it work and learn about language, speech and the systems behind them," she says. "I loved studying it."

During her university study, Potts took on administrative work at the National Institute of Youth Performing Arts Australia, an umbrella organisation that houses the Australian Youth Choir and the Australian Youth Dance Theatre.

But after graduating, she left administration to embrace her new career. Her role as a speech pathologist within the hospital system saw Potts working with people who had had brain injuries or strokes and with many elderly people with dementia. She soon discovered that her role dealt with the essentials of eating and drinking, rather than simply language and communication.

"Swallowing is the basic function for survival, so in an acute setting, making sure people can safely eat and drink becomes your priority," she says.

While she loved the contact with people, the realities of hospital budgets proved difficult.

"You're working really closely with people to help them," she says. "[But] you don't get to spend as much time as you'd like as you have so many people on your caseload. It

becomes a matter of prioritising, maybe just on their eating, not on their speech."

Potts also found she missed music so, after three years in speech pathology, she accepted a full-time role as an arts administrator with her former employer NIYPAA.

She now says she's on the right career path.

"I'm involved in the organisation of the choral and dance programs for the Australian Youth Choir and the Australian Youth Dance Theatre," she says. "As part of the administrative team, I work behind the scenes to make sure the artistic director's decisions happen."

While there's far more computer time at NIYPAA than in her speech pathology days, Potts loves that her new job has an important relationship-building component.

"We have programs for kids from [ages] 7-18 and I organise their weekly rehearsals during school term, as well as the run sheets for concerts," she says. "It's really rewarding. We also have a big recruitment drive where we go into schools; part of my role is to build the relationships with schools to spread the word about the programs we have."

Potts has gone back to university to do a master's degree in arts and cultural management and says she's never been happier.

"My general well-being and happiness have improved," she says.

So much so, in fact, that she is unconcerned that careers in her new field of arts administration have a reputation of being somewhat poorly remunerated.

"I love that I'm surrounded by music, so money is not such a driving motivator," she says.

SUE WHITE



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NOW

SALARY As a speech pathologist starting out, the pay is usually about \$45,000. "A few years later I was on \$55,000-58,000."

WORK-LIFE BALANCE "A hard role not to take home. Although I wouldn't physically be at work, it would often be on my mind."

HOURS 8am to 5.30pm or 6pm, Monday to Friday. "About every six weeks I also had to do a weekend cover."



Social ... Meredith Potts works in the arts after a career in speech pathology (above). Photo: Rodger Cummins

SALARY \$40,000.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE "In the arts you're encouraged to go out and see performances. It's a very social world. But you also need to keep up with what others are doing, so it's vital you are actively involved in the general arts community."

HOURS 9am to 5pm with occasional evening concerts.

MISS "At times I miss applying the specialist knowledge I learned at university. Recently a mum rang up. Her child had a nodule on the vocal cords. I was able to talk to her about what the implications might be and how choir might help."

CHALLENGES "Time management ... getting through everything that needs to be done can be challenging."

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