Mark uses his own experience of living with disability to help others

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Mark Burgess knows what it's like to face barriers. Born Deaf, he has used hearing aids for most of his 61 years, and in the past has struggled to find people who wanted to employ him. Now working in the disability sector, Mark is using his own lived experience to help others.

Mark works as a Local Area Coordinator with the NDIS, supporting others living with disability to find and use supports to live their best lives.

"I work with NDIS participants to help develop their plans, support them to get linked to mainstream community services, and help them achieve their goals through NDIS funded supports," he said.

Mark's own experience of living with a disability helps him to support participants with empathy and understanding.

"When I am working with Deaf NDIS participants, I'm able to help them understand their NDIS plan, because Deaf people who communicate in Auslan interpret information differently," he said.

"NDIS plans need to be explained to Deaf people in a different way. Auslan and English are different languages, so I can communicate in their language.

"Also, I guess the experience of hitting barrier after barrier in my life enables me to offer empathy to other people living with disability, with an understanding of what it is like coming up against people not accepting them for who they are."

For much of his working life, Mark worked in the printing industry before it collapsed.

For 6 years, he unsuccessfully looked for work in administration.

"At interviews I could tell by people's faces, when they realised I was a Deaf person, they judged me for my disability rather than my ability or resume," he said.

Frustrated, annoyed, but resilient, Mark kept plugging away.

He finally found an employer in the disability sector who valued his lived experience. It was a breakthrough and the start of a new career.

"I remember being notified that my application was successful on my 53rd birthday. I was elated that I finally came across an employer that didn't judge me for my hearing loss," he said.

As an NDIS participant himself, Mark’s plan funds hearing aids and an interpreter, helping him to take part in his community and achieve his personal goals.

Mark now works on the New South Wales Central Coast for NDIS Partner in the Community, Social Futures. He works closely with NDIS participants, helping them to understand and access the Scheme.

He also performs an important advocacy role in the community.

“Another part of my role is Community Capacity Building, doing community projects, and raising awareness about inclusion to mainstream businesses and community services,” Mark said.

“Currently I’m working to get open captioned movies shown in cinemas on the Central Coast.”

For Mark, the job is enjoyable, and the work is meaningful.

“Being employed makes me feel like I am contributing to society, and it enables me to be more financially independent,” he said.

“Having good work colleagues, including management, makes the job enjoyable.

“I had my birthday a few weeks ago, and unbeknown to me, my colleagues had been secretly practicing singing Happy Birthday in Auslan.

“I was really taken aback by that, it was fantastic. It really brought home how welcome and accepted I was.”

September 19-25 is National Week for Deaf People. This year’s theme is Building Inclusive Communities for all. The NDIS supports 24,615 participants with hearing impairment.

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