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Despite the challenges of a global pandemic, nearly 7 years after Justin Tala first started working at the Glenwood Public School, he continues to be a valued employee and an important member of the school community.

“As a school, things have of course been a bit challenging with the pandemic, but Justin has been able to continue to do his role and has been very adaptable,” Glenwood Public School Principal Jay McInney says.

“Justin has worked through the challenges of lockdowns and so forth and has continued to do his work and help make this place a very happy place to be.

“I don’t think the kids or staff see Justin as a person with a disability. They just see Justin as Justin, someone who does important jobs around the school, who likes to converse with teachers, who is always saying hello.

“Justin is a very positive presence in our school. He lifts people’s spirits and is part of our school community.”

Justin, 25, who lives with a moderate intellectual disability and autism, began working at Glenwood Public School in 2016 after he set himself the goal of finding a job after leaving school.

With School Leaver Employment Support funded through the NDIS, Justin connected with local employment provider JobSupport.

The provider worked with Justin to help build his skills and confidence before supporting Justin to secure an ongoing position at the school.

Today, Justin is a well-known and much-loved member of school staff who is passionate about his work and has built solid connections with other staff.

“I love working at the school,” Justin says. “Everyone is nice. I have a staff uniform and a name badge.

“I like doing different jobs like laminating and organising the books. It makes me happy.”

Justin’s daily routine starts with a round of photocopying and delivering class materials to teachers. He then moves on to recycling, administration, filing, sorting class readers and other necessary jobs around the school.

“Justin does a variety of time-consuming jobs that might otherwise take teachers and office staff away from other work they need to do,” Jay says.

“Things like laminating and sharpening pencils, arranging books – they may seem like trivial tasks, but they need to be done and they make a big difference to our teachers and staff.”

Justin’s employment continues to be supported through his NDIS plan, which also provides funding for support workers and transport assistance to and from work.

Jay says he believes the NDIS-funded employment program benefits the school and the broader community.

“Justin is part of our school community, and everyone knows his family too, so there’s that interconnectedness and those relationships that are built beyond the four walls of the school,” he says.

“That’s very important, because what that is doing is forging that link between schools and community. It’s forging that link for Justin between his workplace and the community.”

Justin’s mother Carmen says her son’s work provides him with a daily routine and strong sense of purpose he might otherwise not have.

“He feels important that he’s working because he feels that he’s doing something good, which makes him very happy,” Carmen says.

“When Justin was finishing high school, I was very nervous about what was going to happen to him. I was thinking, ‘What kind of job is my son going to do? Who is going to employ my son? How are they going to treat my son?’

“I was worried about those things because he’s very sensitive, and I was afraid he wouldn’t be able to find a job. The NDIS has been great from the beginning because if it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t have all this help for my son, and for that I’m grateful.

“Now I feel more secure. My son has this great work experience and is surrounded by beautiful people who really care about him.”

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