Joining NDIS in early days paved Ben’s pathway to paid employment

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Winnie and Gary Andrews jumped at the chance to have their son Ben join the NDIS during early trials in the Hunter region of New South Wales in 2014.

It was a move that changed Ben’s life.

'Ben was getting some state government support before, but nothing like he’s had with the NDIS,' Gary said.

'The funding before was very limited.

'It was basically Ben going to the same building every day and just painting things.

'But with the NDIS, he’s had opportunities to go out into the community, to do community-based activities, which was never the case previously.'

Ben has Down syndrome and was 24 when he transitioned to the NDIS about 10 years ago.

Around the same time, he expressed a keen desire to learn how to ‘pull a beer’.

Ben’s new NDIS support workers suggested a course, and for 6 months, they helped Ben travel to Gosford every week to complete a Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) course.

'He really wanted to learn how to do that, and it was a huge achievement for Ben,' Ben’s mum Winnie says.

'Then his support workers helped Ben do a resume and look around for a job.

'And he scored one at the Happy Wombat.'

For Ben, it was the beginning of a more meaningful and independent life – doing work he loves, meeting people, and earning his own money.

'Ben probably wouldn't be working where he is now or have the confidence to do the things he’s doing if that support hadn't happened early on,' Gary says.

'He was able to meet different groups of people and to make new friends, to do a course that basically got him a job.

'We feel lucky because it made Ben’s life much richer and happier.'

Nine years on, Ben rides his bike to and from work for 4 shifts a week and is saving for a car.

He is now the restaurant’s longest-serving employee and a favourite with regulars.

'Yes, that’s true, I am the longest employee,' Ben says, smiling proudly.

'I love working at the Happy Wombat.

'I’m very happy.

'I like pulling beers and making people coffee.

'I know how to pull a good beer.

'You tip the glass on the side.

'I really like working with Luke, who’s the boss and Renee and Jodie and everyone.'

Ben’s employer, publican Luke Tilse, had a special interest in employing Ben.

Luke’s 8-year-old son Charlie also has Down syndrome.

'For me it’s a bit like looking at the other end of the spectrum and seeing my own son being where Ben is now, 20 years down the track,' Luke says.

'I wanted to give Ben an opportunity but it’s also been so educational and enriching for myself and all the staff.

'Ben handles all aspects of the bar, including the till, and he knows exactly what all his regular customers want.

'He’s an exceptional employee and we need him as much as we need any of our staff.'

Ben’s parents say there are other positive spin-offs from Ben’s working life too.

'Working at the bar has really brought Ben out of his shell,' Gary says.

'Before he started working there, he wouldn't really say much to anyone and now he’s much more outgoing.

'He talks to people, not only at the bar but other people.

'He’s much more socially active.

'The NDIS opened Ben’s world up to a whole bunch of new people and activities, not just at work.

'He has a great relationship with his support workers.

'They go out and do boxing together and go to the gym.

'They do things together that Ben loves.'

Ben says he likes keeping fit and rides his bike independently around Newcastle, clocking up about 100 kilometres a week.

Early on Sundays, he rides to the headland.

'I take pictures of the sunrise and send them to my mum and my sister,' Ben says.

On his way home, Ben sometimes rides past his second home – the Happy Wombat.

He’ll stop to help Luke and the team set up for the day, though it’s Ben’s own day off.

'I just love it there,' Ben says.

'It makes me happy.'

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