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In 4 short years Australian First Nations artist Travis Hogan has transformed his life.

Travis Hogan in the outback.

Travis lives with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and an intellectual disability. He has trouble concentrating, remembering things, and regulating his emotions and moods.

In his early 20s Travis was often in trouble, without direction, and highly anxious.

‘I was getting myself into mischief, running off in the middle of the night,’ Travis says.

‘I felt trapped. I was angry and couldn’t focus. I was going down the wrong path, getting into trouble and spiralling out of control.’

But Travis is thriving now, surrounded and inspired by the country and people that nurture his talent and walk beside him on his cultural journey.

Emerging from dark times as a First Nations artist

Now 30, Travis is emerging as a gifted First Nations artist. He is slowly building a promising career, supported by a team of people, family, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

He has twice been invited as artist-in-residence at the Adelaide International Airport, to showcase and sell his work to domestic and international visitors during NAIDOC and National Reconciliation weeks. Travis’s success is helping open pathways for other First Nations artists.

‘I feel happy, and proud, I like painting, sharing stories and making my own money,’ Travis says.

A descendant of the Arrernte and Warramungu Nations, Travis grew up in Tennant Creek and Alice Springs before moving to Adelaide.

He has been through some dark times and faced many challenges.

But since reconnecting with his culture and discovering a talent for art, Travis’s life has changed.

Travis and Andrea smiling at the airport.

‘I didn’t know I had this passion and talent to do art until Andrea helped me,’ Travis says.

Andrea is Travis's support worker, funded through his NDIS plan.

Andrea and Travis's family supported Travis with his decision to move out of a disability supported employment environment that wasn't working for him.

'I could see a void in his life and was really worried about his mental health and wellbeing,' Andrea says.

'I could see Travis had lots of potential so I organised some art lessons.'

Learning First Nations culture under the wing of an Elder

'I also approached Red Centre Enterprises and asked Elder Yuandamarra if they could offer Travis work experience or opportunities to reconnect and learn about his culture,' Andrea says.

Andrea introduced Travis to Red Centre Enterprises, a First Nations owned business with the health and wellbeing of their community at its heart.

Travis showing off his art with Yuandamarra at the airport.

Founder and Elder Yuandamarra was happy to take Travis under his wing and share his cultural knowledge, focusing on horticulture, bush tucker and cultural activities. Andrea worked with Travis, his family, community Elders and Red Centre Enterprises to help Travis use his NDIS plan.

'That was a huge turning point,' Andrea says.

'Travis went from having 3 or 4 major incidents a day to the person we see now, someone who is flourishing and doing something he loves. It is such a big difference and it happened so quickly.'

Travis attends Red Centre Enterprises 5 days a week with a balance of art, horticulture activities and opportunities to attend First Nations events and ceremonies, with Andrea by his side.

Travis's NDIS plan also funds his transport to and from the site each day.

Travis is thriving in a place where he belongs

'When I got to Red Centre I felt like I belonged for the first time,' Travis says.

'I love it there. People listen to me, I'm part of a real team. I would like to help younger kids feel like that too so they go down the right path.'

Yuandamarra is one of Travis's cultural mentors, respected Elder, Lore Man, and Custodian of Cultural Knowledge.

‘It’s inspiring to see what the young fella is doing,’ Yuandamarra says.

Travis and Yuandamarra at a smoking ceremony.

‘He is humble with his artwork and has a natural gift. We’ve watched him pick up a paintbrush and put his own cultural stories into paint.’

Travis enjoys sharing stories, knowledge and learnings from Yuandamarra about bush tucker and life on country.

‘I’ve learned so much from Yuandamarra. He tells me stories when we’re gardening, or on country, about the animals, birds and insects we see,’ Travis says.

‘We’re on a bird sanctuary here at Red Centre. Sometimes I’ll paint eagles and put my own background into it, my own stories.’

Selling his work, building his career

Travis uses acrylic paint on canvas to tell his stories and is exploring other mediums.

He sells his original paintings, coasters, and greeting cards at a number of retail outlets including the Sydney Botanic Gardens Shop, Opera House and the Southern Providore at the Adelaide International Airport. He hopes to make his work available to other outlets.

Travis proudly puts his earnings towards art supplies and gifts for family members. His long term goal is to save up and travel back to his community to share his journey and success and inspire other disadvantaged youth.

Travis’s mum Sue says she can hardly believe the change in her son.

‘We have been on quite a journey with the NDIS, trying to get the right funding and level of support for Travis to get him to where he is today,’ Sue says.

‘But he’s gone from a very unhappy young man in a work environment that didn’t meet his needs to doing what he wants to do, with a village of people supporting him. He is happy.
‘I am so proud of what he’s achieving. He’s come such a long way. It’s amazing, amazing!’

Travis aspires to become a recognised First Nations artist and role model for other young First Nations people with disabilities by encouraging them to take up art and walk a good journey.

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