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Charlotte Reid sensed they were different in high school but kept those feelings hidden.

‘Back when I was growing up there wasn’t as much of an understanding about the LGBTIQA+ community as much is there is now. I really didn’t have the words or know the terminology to express what I was feeling. I just thought I was weird,’ Charlotte said.

‘Then for me as an adult, declared legally blind at 12, coming out as transgender… it was a sense of whether I die or live as who I really am. I chose to live as who I really am.’

Joining the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2017, Charlotte, who also has autism, is comfortable today identifying as queer, transgender and a proud Wemba-Wemba Guringai person with disability.

Able to receive supports for psychology, meal prep, cleaning, gardening, community access, orientation and mobility services and to get to appointments, Charlotte said it’s all been lifechanging, but the best support is Kellie, their Guide Dog.

‘A Guide Dog gives you so much more freedom than using a cane. It’s a completely different way of moving about in the community.’ Charlotte said.

‘I found it hard using a cane. I lost a lot of confidence getting out and about but now Kellie has made it so much easier for me. She’s great on buses, planes, trains, and boats.’

With newfound confidence, the 32-year-old Pleasure Point local has become an LGBTIQA+ community advocate sharing personal insights to help others feel valued and supported to come out and live as their true selves.

Working as a Latrobe Community Health Service NDIS local area coordinator, an NDIS partner in the community, Charlotte said they can draw on their own lived experience to support participants.

‘It’s a job I love,’ Charlotte said. ‘I have also worked as an NDIS planner so seeing how the NDIS works from both sides and being part of the LGBTIQA+ community really helps me. It means I can step into a participant’s shoes and really empathise with them from one or both communities.

‘With my own lived experience I can understand their point of view, where they are coming from and what community services and supports they may need or want to access.’

Charlotte said the best thing about being a local area coordinator is supporting participants to achieve their goals.

‘Whether it’s ensuring they can attend day programs, supporting them to build their skills and capacity to find work, or helping them to get out into the community, I just love that sense of helping others with disability,’ Charlotte said.

Passionate about inclusion and diversity, Charlotte is also educating colleagues on best practice.

‘Latrobe Community Health Service has been really inclusive and supportive,’ Charlotte said.

‘I’ve helped educate some of my colleagues on LGBTIQA+ issues, which has helped them to provide the right support to our queer participant cohort.

‘I explained how important it is to the LGBTIQA+ community to use the correct pronouns, especially when we are engaging with participants.

Ahead of this year’s Mardi Gras Festival and its theme ‘Our Future’, Charlotte said they believe equality and inclusion are vitally important to everyone’s safety and wellbeing.

‘Something as simple as using the right pronouns can make a huge difference to someone,’ Charlotte said.

‘It makes them feel like a person rather than just a number. It makes them feel valued for who they are. It’s also taking a holistic view of participants and their circumstances.

‘Everyone has the right to be their true selves and feel safe and respected, regardless of sexuality or gender identity.’

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