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Traralgon’s Leah van Poppel is successful, selfless and humble.

Some may not know her, but she has worked tirelessly to effect change for people with disability in a world where many have been disadvantaged for decades.

Leah is a significant contributor and influential leader in several national and state disability advocacy and policy development roles.

She is actively involved and invested in supporting the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) to administer the NDIS.

Leah sits on the NDIS Board; she is also principal member of the Independent Advisory Council (IAC) to the NDIS, a member of the NDIS Strategic Direction and Participant Outcomes Committee and an NDIS Sustainability Committee member, looking at ways to keep the Scheme sustainable for future generations.

‘I’m interested in how we can make it better for women and girls in the Scheme, especially the ones who have disabilities that aren’t diagnosed as early or as well as they should be,’ Leah said.

‘Many often have greater caring responsibilities too, so these are key priorities for me.’

Born blind in the 80s’, the 43-year-old said she was discriminated against many times growing up and says no one should have to experience that kind of behaviour.

‘Mum had to fight the local preschool and primary school so I could attend,’ Leah said.

‘The Disability Discrimination Act didn’t exist. Mainstream schools could say no to enrolling kids with disabilities. It was practically legal, but not very moral.

‘My older sister Sarah was already at our local, so mum didn’t give up, and as a result I was mainstreamed all the way.’

Even at high school Leah felt unwanted and students made her feel ‘horrible.’

‘It wasn’t a fabulous experience. No one should have to go through that, but what it did do is help me to build resilience,’ she said.

Looking to create a positive change for others with disability, Leah poured herself into study completing a Bachelor of Arts and English Literature at Macquarie University.

She started her first job in the public service at the Deafness Council of WA before moving to Victoria to work in several notable disability advocacy and policy development roles.

‘One of my proudest career moments is working at AFDO (Australian Federation of Disability Organisations) championing for an NDIS,’ Leah said.

‘I was lucky enough to attend National Disability and Carer Alliance meetings and be part of AFDO’s Productivity Commission Inquiry talking to people right round the country about what was wrong with disability supports and helping to provide Scheme recommendations.

‘I remember feeling so proud when Julia Gillard announced the NDIS in Parliament. It was an incredible moment and it’s been great to see it all come to life,’ Leah said.

While there’s still more work to do on the NDIS to improve the Scheme, Leah is proud of the lives it has helped change including her own.

‘I’m an NDIS participant and so is my husband Ben. He’s totally blind,’ Leah said.

‘We have lots of family connections with the Scheme. It’s been really life changing.

‘My poor mum who raised my sister and I on her own had to pay for everything, so it’s wonderful to know people with disabilities now have the funding to buy the supports they need.’

It’s obvious Leah’s proudest personal achievement is her young son Max, who is 4.

‘As a mum I’m pretty lucky. Ben is very onboard, and we share duties. Because we can’t see, we get a range of supports around the house and to help us raise Max. The Scheme has really helped to make our lives easier.’

Leah said support workers have just started coming in to help them take Max out.

‘If Max wants to go to a park and it hasn’t got a fence or to a swimming pool we can’t really supervise him properly, so the support workers come with both or one of us and help.

‘In the support workers car we also go through the Macca’s drive through. It’s a highlight for Max. It’s a day-to-day thing most families do, but we can’t, so we do it with him in the support workers car. It means he doesn’t miss out!

‘I often look back and think wow, how did mum do it. She was pretty amazing woman, and I wouldn’t be where I am today without her,’ Leah said.

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