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McKYE PROVES THEM WRONG

McKye Herbert was diagnosed with non-verbal autism when he was two, a neurologist telling his mother, Jodie, he'd spend his life "sitting on the floor, spinning things".

McKye proved that doctor very wrong.

The now 21-year-old, from Macgregor, has a gardening job, pays taxes

and contributes to society, all possible thanks to NDIS community participation funding.

The government's current NDIS reform bill will remove 50 per cent of community participation funding from people's NDIS plans, and Jodie says this should not happen.

REPORT: INSIDE

McKye Herbert
loves his gardening job.
Picture by Karleen Minney

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NDIS Concerns over community participation funding

A job, a purpose and real support

Megan Doherty

JODIE Herbert says her son, McKye, and his support worker, Rachael Cuzner, are a great team, like Master Blaster from the movie, *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, as they work together on gardening and labouring jobs around Canberra.

"Rach is like the master and McKye's the blaster because he's as strong as an ox. They just work so well together," Jodie said.

Rachael agrees McKye is a fantastic worker, and especially loves mowing.

"The hardest thing is trying to get him to have a break," she said.

"He has the biggest smile while he's doing it. And nothing really fazes him. He loves just getting out and having a go with everybody."

McKye at the age of two was diagnosed with non-verbal autism. Jodie remembers taking him to a neurologist who told her to focus on her other son because McKye would spend his life "sitting on the floor, spinning things".

But McKye proved that doctor wrong. The 21-year-old from Macgregor now has a job. He gets paid an award wage and superannuation. He pays taxes. He's contributing to society. And he's happy.

"There's a glow about him," Jodie said.

Jodie Herbert says McKye used his National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) community participation funding to get the job.

The government's current NDIS reform bill will remove 50 per cent of community participation funding from people's NDIS plans, and Jodie says this is wrong.

"Yes, people use this funding to go to haircuts and movies, but they also use it to pay for support to learn critical skills and attend interviews and trials required to get the job, go to Centrelink, attend doctor appointments and do volunteer work. That's how McKye got his start," she said.

For the past two years, McKye has been working as a gardening assistant, first by volunteering and then by using his National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) payments to effectively create a job for himself.

Mum Jodie came up with the funding model, which has seen McKye employed by local horticulturalist Haiden Bush, and his not-for-profit company, I've Got You Empowerment.

McKye works 16 hours a week. The NDIS, under Jodie's model, funds one support worker for McKye to allow him to get to work and to do the work. He is part of a crew, including other people with disabilities.

"They charge the support hours back to my son's NDIS plan, so that covers his award wage and the support worker's award wage, and then they charge the customer a commercial rate and that goes back to the business," Jodie said.

"It's such a good model. I wish more people were doing it. Businesses could hire people with significant disabilities using this model.

"My son is so happy. He feels empowered. And he's matured. He gets up and he gets himself dressed and he makes his own lunch and he's ready when they come to pick him up to take him to the job site," she said.

Jodie and husband Peter live in Macgregor with McKye, their other son, Callan, and their daughter, Jaime.

Jodie said McKye's success was proof that the NDIS could be a hand up not a hand-out.

McKye is working for a business, not a



McKye Herbert and support worker Rachael Cuzner. Picture by Karleen Minney

social enterprise. He has been working for two years whereas many people with disabilities work for just 26 weeks - for as long as government-funded wage subsidies and other incentives are on offer.

"Two years is quite remarkable in this space," Jodie said.

McKye's boss, Haiden Bush, is someone who understands the value of giving people a chance.

A trained horticulturalist, 30-year-old Haiden had his own landscaping business, but it collapsed during the pandemic. He also suffered a mental breakdown and battled a painkiller addiction.

Haiden "accidentally fell into working in community services" and started doing transport shifts for people with disabilities, including McKye.

At the time, McKye was attending Jigsaw, a social enterprise that helps people with disabilities to get into mainstream employment. Jodie said Jigsaw helped McKye to learn what was expected in a job but they were told not much would likely be on offer for him.

Then, Haiden and Jodie had a conversation that changed everything.

"One day, Jodie and I were talking and I told her a little bit about my back story and she said, 'Oh, can we get McKye to start gardening?', I was like, 'One hundred per cent'," Haiden said.

Haiden had found that working with people with disabilities gave him a new lease on life. He was able to give up the painkillers. And he found real purpose in being a support worker.

"I realised if someone like McKye can be smiling and just so grateful to even be

on this earth, what have I got to complain about?" he said.

"So I started teaching McKye gardening which was good, because I'd been landscaping for 13 years before that and I could use those skills again. But I could also give McKye a purpose, a reason to get up in the morning. And that essentially gave me a purpose as well."

Haiden ended up being a support worker for McKye with two companies and then opened his own business, I've Got You Empowerment, based on the model of funding devised by Jodie. He continues to provide employment for McKye and other people with disabilities. The jobs include everything from gardening to pamphlet delivery to administration.

In the job, McKye uses a mower, whipper snipper and sometimes the hedge trimmer under the supervision of Haiden. But he also does work like weeding, rubbish removal and loading up the ute.

Haiden said having McKye involved in the business would not be possible without the support of the NDIS. McKye needed a support worker to get him to work and he needed someone on site to help him through the day.

"There are participants with intellectual disabilities who will work their way up to not having support," Haiden said.

"With someone like McKye, he'll never be able to do it. For starters - how is he supposed to go from job to job? The NDIS will return with, 'Oh they can catch public transport'. That's all well and good if he has one bus to catch on one route. But what happens if something goes wrong? How is he supposed to communicate?

"McKye brings plenty of value to our team. Why would it be fair for him to not have a job? He's paying taxes, the support workers are paying taxes, I'm sure we're paying four different lots of taxes. So how is that not bringing value into the Australian economy?"

As part of the setup, Jodie also organised for The Personnel Group, a provider of Inclusive Employment Australia, to be a third-party check for the arrangement, to ensure everyone was happy.

She said McKye had also relied on community participation funding from the NDIS to make that first step towards getting a job, to being able to volunteer with Haiden, when two years ago they started to maintain the gardens of people Jodie knew or other people with disabilities or pensioners who couldn't do their own gardens.

That was the seed that led to McKye getting a job. The government's bill around changes to the NDIS includes cutting back community participation funding by 50 per cent. Jodie believes that's the wrong way to go.

"You can't take away 50 per cent of people's community participation funding because they use it to go out and get a job. They use it to get to the interview, to do the application, or meet with The Personnel Group," she said.

"When [the funding is] used well, it can actually lead into an award paying job for them. And when I say this to other mothers, who have kids with disabilities, with less needs than McKye, they're kind of astounded that McKye is working and doing all of this.

"It's a real success story."