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At 56, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participant, John has found more than a volunteer role at an Op Shop – he's found purpose, pride, and a welcoming community, which feels like a second home.

Every Friday, without fail, John is up early, dressed and ready for his Op Shop shift.

'When I get there, I put my bag on the shelf, or I hang my bag up. I go and do some office work or clothes work,' he said proudly.

'I empty out all the bags onto a table. I count the clothes and sort them into colours, pink, red… I also help with sizing and pricing,' he added.

This routine may seem simple to some, but for John, who has a moderate intellectual disability and some behavioural challenges, it's a personal goal he's proud he can do.

Volunteering has boosted his confidence, built his independence, all while he gains the job and social skills he needs to reach his main goal, to get paid work.

When John's support workers, Luke, Wayne and Steph, first started working with him they found he wasn't very focused on doing tasks. He also had trouble regulating his behaviour.

But the more they worked with him they noticed when John was asked to lead a task he would lift, his behaviour would improve, he would focus, see the job through and do it well.

'We could see it made him feel valued, useful and part of the team,' Luke said.

Knowing this, John's other support worker, Wayne, came up with a plan. He knew John's main goal was to find work, so he called Op Shop manager, Sarah, to ask if it was possible for John to do a bit of volunteering work there.

Sarah said yes, so Wayne set up a few visits to help John get to know Sarah and all the other volunteers.

'We wanted to ease John into the idea of volunteering there. We thought it would be a good fit for him with what we had noticed,' Luke said.

'We wanted to see if he would like it and would feel good about working there and he did!'

At first John started doing a few hours every Friday, alongside Steph, but it didn't take long before he started asking if he could stay longer and work the entire day.

Now, John looks forward to Fridays. He’s learned lots of new skills – how to use the cash register, take card and cash payments and work out the change using a calculator.

‘The cash register is my favourite job,’ he said. ‘I also like greeting all the customers. When they come in, I say, “Welcome to the shop.” They say, “Thank you.” Then I go, “If you need anything, ask me,”’ he added proudly.

It’s clear John has become a bit of a favourite at the Op Shop too. Regular customers like to stop in on Fridays just to say hi and have a bit of a chat.

Luke, Wayne and Steph have played key roles, helping John grow in his role too.

When he said he wanted to work on the front desk, they supported him to learn the skills.

‘We showed John how to greet customers, use the register, take the money, use a calculator to work out the change and how to take card payments,’ Luke said. ‘He picked up the card payment system quickly too, with little guidance!’ he added.

The impact this type of support has had on John is huge.

Volunteering has been a positive step forward, supporting his social and job skills. It’s also had a positive effect on his behaviour, helping him to regulate his emotions.

‘John is a different man to the one we all started working with. He’s improved so much,’ Luke said. ‘We are all really proud of him.’

Now feeling proud, purposeful and with a strong set of job-ready skills, John is getting ready for his next big step, to get paid work.

‘We put all the jobs I do at the Op Shop on my resume,’ he said.

‘I’d like to see if I can get a job at a supermarket. I like helping customers and working in a team. That kind of job would be great.’

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