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Left to right: Anne Nioa, Ariana Nioa, Jackson Nioa, and Lucy Edwards.

You couldn't wipe the smile off 25-year-old Ariana Nioa's face as she threw her mortar board into the air after graduating from STEPS Pathways College in Caloundra last month.

The Maryborough woman has called the College home for the last two years, studying as a boarding student living on campus. For the past six months, Ariana's residence at STEPS has been funded by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Ariana - who has Down syndrome - has been learning how to maintain a tenancy, access health and local services, effectively bank and budget, use technology and stay healthy and well, with the goal of moving out and living independently.

"Ariana's very confident now in her ability to get from A to B without any support whatsoever, so that's been a huge change," Ariana's mum Anne said.

"She now catches the train to Maryborough from Caloundra by herself. She goes down and books her own train ticket, I don't have to do any of that for her anymore.

"I'm so very proud of her achievements. You're proud of both your kids, but when you know how hard they've had to work to achieve something, it's fantastic."

Ariana is ready to embark on the next chapter of her life post-graduation, planning to move out with one of her College friends in the coming months.

"I bought Ariana a little cottage here for when she came back, but she doesn't want to come back to Maryborough. She now thinks that her life is in Caloundra, which is just fantastic because with the support of the NDIS, we can actually make that happen."

"I love being on the NDIS because it gives me lots of independence and it gives me funding and help with transport," Ariana said.

Prior to joining the NDIS in June 2017, Ariana did not receive any supports. Now, the NDIS helps her with supports to increase her independence, day-to-day living and transport.

It's not just Ariana who's seeing the benefits of the NDIS in her life.

"I howled for a week when my son went away to university. When Ariana left, I got on a plane and went to Morocco," Anne said.

"For the first 23 years of Ariana's life, it was just me, so having the opportunity for her to spread her wings and also for me to explore new opportunities because I wasn't a 24/7 carer

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anymore, has been quite inspirational on a whole lot of levels.

“The NDIS will open up an enormous amount of opportunity that was never available to people with children with disability.

“Having a scheme like the NDIS is very comforting for so many people, especially as you get older. Caring responsibilities aren't left to other family members and that's probably one of the greatest joys for me. I know Ariana can be self-funded into independent living and if something did happen to me, her brother wouldn't have to take full responsibility, and he can enjoy and live his life - as he should.

“It's certainly life changing for parents as well as people who are getting the benefit of the NDIS.”

STEPS Pathways College is designed to provide young adults with a disability with the opportunity to further develop the skills needed to experience a life of independence.

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