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A western Sydney program is changing the lives of teenagers with hearing impairments by bringing them together in creative and exciting environments, building teamwork and communication skills and exposing them to potential career options.

The Rock My World program, funded through a NDIA Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant, includes film-making workshops, tours of a television studio and professional sporting club, and confidence and community-building activities.

Rock My World is the brainchild of the team at Hear For You, an organisation established in 2008 by deaf adults, to help deaf teenagers to more easily navigate a difficult time in their lives.

Teenagers like 16-year-old Jared Donaldson, who loves that the program brings together young people who “get each other”, overriding a feeling well known to young hearing-impaired people of being alone, not fitting in or being understood.

“The thing I like most is making friends with other deaf teenagers who understand what it’s like to be hearing impaired and the daily challenges that I face,” Jared said.

“As much as my parents support me, they don’t understand what it’s really like. That’s why the mentors and friends I’ve made through Hear For You are so important to me.”

Hear For You western Sydney coordinator Rebecca Stewart, who grew up in a large, mostly hearing-impaired family, says the sessions are driven by a desire to help the teenagers reach their goals, whatever they may be. As a budding chef, Jared is encouraged to bring food in to share with his peers.

“We want to see Jared achieve his goal of becoming a chef,” Rebecca said.

“For other teens their goal might be simply improving their confidence in social situations, learning to make friends or starting to advocate for their hearing loss.”

Friends of Hear For You have inspired the NSW programs, like film-maker and author Pauline Findlay, who runs the film-making workshops. In these, teens gain skills in story writing and creative communication, spend two days filming, two days editing and an evening watching their films on the big screen in a cinema.

The TV studio tour exposes them to what happens behind the scenes in Australian television production, and the career opportunities that are available to them in the industry.

At A-League soccer club Western Sydney Warriors they meet the players, tour the facility and spend time with the club's hearing-impaired sports physiotherapist.

"It's a great chance for them to see that their career options aren't limited by their hearing loss, and to ask questions about what it's like being in the workforce with hearing aids," Rebecca said.

Other activities, like the Escape Room and Treetops Adventure, foster teamwork and communication skills and encourage participants to push themselves out of their comfort zone to achieve.

Jared's mother Nicole was referred to Hear For You when her son was in Year 6, and remembers "almost dragging him" to his first life skills workshop.

"He really didn't want to go, but when I picked him up, he couldn't stop talking about what he did, and he hasn't looked back," Nicole said.

Through Hear For You, Jared heard about last year's Australian Deaf Games in Albury. He entered the tenpin bowling, now competes in a weekly league, and at Easter won the National Deaf Tenpin Bowling Championships.

"I wouldn't have even known about it without Hear For You," Jared said.

"They've helped me with so many tips and strategies for communicating in the adult world."

Nicole has been emboldened by the support network created among parents through their children's association.

"While our kids are having fun at Hear For You, we share our experiences and give support and advice over coffee. It's made a huge difference to Jared making it through high school," Nicole said.

When Rebecca Stewart was growing up, the absence of programs like Rock My World contributed to her knowing few hearing-impaired adults or teenagers outside her family. Seeing what it does for participants moves her.

"The sessions really build community, they give the teens a chance to get to know each other and really see that they aren't alone. We use the foundation of something fun to bring them together, but the community is what makes the biggest difference to their self-confidence," Rebecca said.

The program was developed using a \$99,411 grant from the NDIS ILC program.

The NDIS ILC Program funds projects to support people with disability, including those who do not have an NDIS plan. More than 350 grants have been awarded for a total value of \$152.68 million to help build communities and services that are inclusive and enable people with

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disability to connect with the same services and activities that all Australians enjoy

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