

Posted on:

27 November 2019

Chris Riordan is a long-time champion of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, but when the time came for him to organise his first NDIS plan earlier this year he had to get his priorities right – first go to South Australia to win the state’s Sailability Championship in his class.

He followed up with a silver medal at the 2019 Masters Games held in Adelaide in October, sailing a single-handed Hansa Liberty, and is now considering heading overseas to compete in next year’s Sailability World Championships.

This fiercely determined 49 year old from Mildura in Victoria’s north west has never let his cerebral palsy get in the way of achieving his ambitions, starting with completing mainstream Year 12 in an era when school students with physical disabilities were largely confined to special schools.

Chris took up recreational sailing as soon as he finished school.

“I’d always wanted to sail so the first thing I did was join the Hawthorn Sailing Club,” he says. “A bit later when I moved to South Australia for work I was encouraged to join the Sailability program, which was great because the boats are specially designed so they don’t tip over.

“I had a go and in my first year came second in the national championships.”

Chris’s passion for sailing took him to the top of his sport, winning the Australian Access nationals two times and representing Australia at international competitions in Italy, Canada and Malaysia. He eventually reached the ranking of third in the world in his class.

He’s also enjoyed a 30-year career in the IT industry and still works as an IT specialist and trainer for Mildura-based NDIS service provider the Christie Centre.

“I like being independent,” he says. “I drive myself to work and enjoy demonstrating my expertise in an area where physical disability really is no barrier to achieving success.

“It’s important for everyone to see people with disabilities like myself participating fully in society.”

Chris has just completed a Certificate IV course in disability care and is keen to combine his skills, mentoring NDIS participants on how to use IT to self-manage their plans.

Chris was an active participant in the Every Australian Counts grassroots campaign that fought for the introduction of the NDIS from 2011 onwards. In 2018 he was appointed one of seven Every Australian Counts Champions and represents the disability community wherever he goes.

“The NDIS is all about supporting people with disabilities to reach their goals and my Local Area Coordinator Louise Di Toro (from Intereach) encouraged me to put sailing at the centre of my plan, so that’s exactly what I did,” Chris says.

“My first plan came through in June and that meant I was able to pay my support worker Brad to help me when I travelled to the Masters Games in Adelaide.

“Brad is one of my best mates, he’s also a qualified carer and he knows my boat. He’s travelled with me before but always had to pay for himself – I can’t describe how good it felt to pay him after all these years.”

Chris competed in his boat Jonathan Livingston Seagull, but despite good performances “there was this guy from Goolwa I just couldn’t keep up with, it was a real dogfight”.

“I use an online simulator called Sailaway to practice race tactics, so I’m working on that now to improve my game!” Chris says.

Chris self manages his NDIS plan and says he couldn’t be more grateful for the support he now has, especially given he received very little support outside his family circle for most of his life.

“Between myself and my parents, we’ve pretty much had to pay for everything,” he says.

“Mum and dad are now in their mid to late 70s so the NDIS has definitely come at the right time.

“I’ve actually got my own place just around the corner from mum and dad, which I need to modify before I can move in hopefully next year.”

Chris has also used his funding to purchase assistive technology including a wheelie walker, which he was against purchasing initially because he is proud of his ability to walk most places.

“It’s actually come in very useful since I’ve had it, it takes the pressure off my hips which have been giving me hell,” he says.

“The Scheme is already making a real difference helping people with disabilities reach their goals, and it’s also changing attitudes as people with disabilities become much more visible.

“People don’t stare at me as much as they used to and they no longer make the same sorts of assumptions about my capabilities. Barriers are being broken.”

Related Stories and videos

In honour of World Cerebral Palsy Day, where the World comes together to support some 17 million living with CP, Stefan is proud to take a shot at celebrating his achievements, and those

of many others.

Stefan sets sights on Paris after leaving goals in his wake

30 September 2021

At 25, Stefan's a man on a mission who doesn't waste a waking moment.

Stefan's riding a wave of success

7 February 2020

Kieran is achieving a life-long goal with help from NDIS support worker

Blind Para-cyclist champion says NDIS makes life easier - on and off the track

1 December 2021

[More stories and videos](#)