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When José 'Elijah' Arranz finished Year 12, he joined thousands of other students across the ACT in celebrating the end of his schooldays.

But for 18-year-old Elijah (the name he prefers) his graduation was cause for extra jubilation, marking a miraculous comeback from a near-death experience in late 2015 that left him with a severe traumatic brain injury and unable to walk or talk.

"It's been a fun year with lots of great memories," says Elijah, who is now an NDIS participant. "I feel pretty chuffed with myself."

Most of his subjects were undertaken in a modified program but he also completed a non-modified Year 12 maths course, finishing the academic year towards the top of his class.

"His maths results at school have been good all year," his mother Robin says. "Due to the accident his memory's not great, which makes it all the more impressive."

Elijah's school, St Francis Xavier College, recognised his outstanding achievement by presenting him with the 2019 Inspiration Award at the school's graduation ceremony earlier this month.

Next year Elijah plans to study business and accounting part-time at Canberra Institute of Technology as he continues rebuilding his strength and balance, which is key to him being able to walk - and eventually run - unassisted once more.

"I want to go to the Paralympics and compete in the long-distance running events," Elijah says. "I'm targeting the 2028 games in Los Angeles."

Elijah has always loved sport, especially basketball, and showed plenty of talent as a long distance runner. He represented the ACT in his age group at the Cross Country Nationals and in 2015 at the age of 14 he ran his first City2Surf in Sydney, completing the course in under an hour.

Then in November that year came the terrible skydiving accident that caused Elijah's injuries and killed his experienced instructor, ex-serviceman Tony Rokov.

"Elijah was there for his cousin's birthday jump and the decision to jump himself was a spur of the moment thing on the day," Robin says. "It was a freak gust of wind as they were coming down that caused the accident - Tony died protecting Elijah."

"We ended up living in Sydney for four days shy of a year," Robin says. "I stayed in Sydney the whole time with Elijah after he got out of hospital and my husband and daughter came up

every weekend.

“The reason we stayed in Sydney as long as we did was because Elijah’s rehab went so well. What normally happens is that after a while you plateau and the rehab tails off, but Elijah never plateaued, he just kept on improving and the therapy was so good that it made sense to stay.

“By the time we made it back to Canberra he’d kicked so many goals and blown everybody out of the water at the hospital. He got a new care team in Canberra and has just kept on improving.”

Robin also pays tribute to the support her family got from the Canberra community.

“Both my husband and I had to take a lot of time off work after the accident and it was absolutely unbelievable the way the community rallied behind us with fundraisers and suchlike,” she says. “We wouldn’t have been able to do what we did without that.”

Elijah joined the NDIS in 2016 while he was still in hospital. His NDIS plan has since funded a range of physical and speech therapy, as well as one-on-one care, transport funding and a range of equipment including a power assist wheelchair and walking frame.

“Because Elijah’s accident happened when he was 14 he’s obviously grown a lot so we’ve had to constantly replace equipment, and it’s been great to have the funding for that,” Robin says.

NDIS funding also paid for modifications to the bathroom and a ramp outside the front of the house, all completed before Elijah got home from hospital.

In his most recent plan Elijah applied for and received more funding for home modifications.

“We’re making the kitchen fully compatible with Elijah’s needs so that he can wheel himself under the sink, under the bench and under the stove,” Robin says. “All the appliances are fully accessible now.

“We’re also removing the carpet and other flooring types downstairs and replacing them with just one low-slip surface to make it safer for Elijah, given he practises his walking inside the house.

“It’s all about supporting Elijah to become more independent.”

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