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Technology is transforming the lives of people with disability, and increasingly the innovative work being done behind the scenes is being driven by passionate people with their own lived experience to draw on.

Meet Steve Ralph, 27, a key part of the team that has built and released a voice-enabled digital assistant called Maslow that allows young people living with paralysis to exert more control over their lives.

Steve has been in a wheelchair since breaking his neck in a swimming accident at the end of 2017 and has been a participant in the NDIS since 2018. He doesn't have use of his legs and says his hands are "pretty paralysed", although he's steadily building movement in his upper body and can use a manual wheelchair.

"Since my accident I've developed a keen interest in the emerging digital landscape and how tech opens up possibilities for people living with disabilities," he says.

"I'm a big user of Apple HomeKit (an iPhone app) to control my home environment and I was giving a few talks about the technology around Sydney when I came across the two Maslow founders, Andrew Akib and Nitin Fernandez, who just happened to be in the audience at one of the events."

This was in February 2019, just a few months after Maslow was founded.

"We got chatting afterwards and I've been working pretty closely with the Maslow guys since then," Steve says. "I've helped out a lot with user testing, providing feedback about useful features and functions and also the sorts of frustrations early versions caused people like myself.

"From my own experience I know that following a spinal injury your whole world gets turned upside down. You've got to come to terms with it both emotionally and mentally, as well as learning about your health and how to manage that.

"What we found at Maslow was that there wasn't one central place to manage all that."

The app combines plan language health modules with exercise and workout routines, to enable in-home rehab and keep participants on track with healthy habits, managing injuries and preventing secondary complications.

"There's a whole bunch of mental benefits you get from rehab, both in terms of personal wellbeing and in hammering the neural regeneration. And that's where Maslow is so helpful," Steve says.

“The ultimate goal with Maslow is to have people with spinal injuries more connected with their health workers, and to maintain a stored personal health database that travels with you if you need to share key information with new health and rehab providers."

Steve manages his NDIS plan, which provides him with one-on-one in-home support several hours a day. It has also paid for both his manual and motorised wheelchairs and helps him attend nearby gym sessions with a personal trainer, using his transport funding.

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