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When Dennis Alvers took his daughter Danielle to listen to Mackay’s all-abilities Choir of Unheard Voices five years ago, he had no idea he had finally discovered the key to unlock her life.

Since that fateful day Danielle, now 35, has become a core member of the choir and loves nothing more than performing to live audiences around the Queensland regional centre – even more so with the choir back in action after a lengthy layoff caused by the COVID lockdown.

Choir founder and organiser Margie Ross, herself a singer songwriter, says Danielle is a perfect example of the power of music and song to change people’s lives.

“When Danielle started with us five years ago she was largely non-verbal and presented as quite disengaged,” Margie says. “She wasn’t that interested in the choir at first but I encouraged Dennis to keep bringing her.

“After about a year I heard her repeat the count-in that I always do ahead of a song – and that was it for me! I told her that was now her job and since then she’s always counted us in, not only that but she has become one of the most beautiful members of our choir.”

Along with several other choir members, Danielle is an NDIS participant and uses her plan funding to pay her choir fees.

Danielle’s mother Helen says participation in the choir has transformed her daughter, who has lived with an acquired brain injury after experiencing a massive brain infection following a bout of meningitis when she was six months old. She is also blind.

“Ten years ago she wouldn’t have understood a word you said, but now she understands what words are and can actually string together up to five words in a sentence,” Helen says.

“She’s learnt how to sit still with the choir and now sits with them up on stage when they’re performing, even at big venues like the Mackay Entertainment Centre. She even joins in with a few songs, it’s very quiet and you can hardly hear her, but compared to where she’s been for most of her life that is huge.”

Margie started the choir 12 years ago as a singing group for people experiencing mental illness, backed by a short-term grant and support from Queensland Health and two community groups.

“Funding ran out five years ago but luckily the NDIS came along and I was able to register as a service provider, so NDIS participants can use their plan funds to attend choir sessions which in turn cover the costs of renting a space and running the program,” she says.

“We’ve become a part of our complex community, visiting aged care homes and respite centres as well as providing public performances and workshops for the local Mackay community and beyond.

“We had our first post-lockdown performance at a housing conference just two weeks ago and even though it wasn’t the full choir, it just felt great to be back in action again.”

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