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With Christmas fast approaching, Dan O’Keefe is working hard to ensure Santa’s sleigh is full to overflowing with his array of designer socks, greeting cards and drink coasters.

The artistically talented and multilingual young man from Sydney’s Neutral Bay runs his own micro-enterprise, Dan’s Designs, out of the Avenue co-working space. Avenue is a day program operating under the umbrella of disability service provider Fighting Chance.

Dan is one of Avenue’s original entrepreneurs, coming on board about the same time he joined the NDIS in 2016. Now 24, Dan has moderate autism and moderate learning difficulties.

He also has a prodigious memory, loves to draw and has a passion for socks, so Avenue’s support to help him create a business accommodating his skills and interests is a match made in heaven.

Dan’s mother, Kelly Hargreaves, says her son’s artistic talent emerged unexpectedly while the family was living in the Hungarian capital Budapest.

“We lived in Budapest for four years and Dan went to kindergarten there,” she says. “He has a natural ear for languages and he was the first of us to learn the rudiments of Hungarian.

“Having said that, he was a kid who never showed any interest in drawing, then one day I was driving past his teacher and she made me pull over and said ‘I’ve got to show you something’. She had 30 pictures he’d drawn and they were incredible.

“They were in this cartoon style and showed amazing angles and movement and perspective. One of them was of this bug orchestra all playing instruments but pictured from the back, with the movements of the different insects all captured in silhouette.”

Dan completed high school in Sydney and, with extensive support from a teaching method called Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), his verbal, reading and writing abilities are well developed.

Dan attended a day program for two years after leaving school until Kelly heard about Avenue through a personal connection and decided to enrol Dan. She says her son took a while to settle in “but he’s doing really nicely now”.

Avenue helps Dan digitise his artwork and apply the designs to socks, cards and coasters. He has full ownership of all stages of the production process from signing off the artwork to conducting market testing on product prototypes and deciding how much stock to order.

Dan goes to Avenue five days a week with his attendance paid for through his NDIS plan. He has a daily program catering specifically to his needs, including time spent on his design business and in Avenue’s other microbusinesses.

“To give one example, Avenue prepares and sends customer orders for a partner that makes pegless clotheslines,” Kelly says. “He quite enjoys that and he has to liaise with others in the production team so it’s building his social skills as well.”

Kelly says her son is now flourishing with support from his NDIS plan, and his confidence and social skills have allowed him to move out into an apartment he shares with another young woman with a disability.

“There are things he’ll probably never be able to do but he’s now much more capable of looking after himself and has become aware of his place in the world,” she says.

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