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Despite living through Melbourne’s long tough lockdowns, life for NDIS participant Ben Pierce has been moving along in leaps and bounds.

Come rain or shine, on most days for the past two years, Ben, 27, has taken to the streets of south-east Melbourne for several hours, exercising dogs from Pets Haven, the local animal shelter where he is a valued volunteer.

For Ben, who lives with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dog-walking has provided him with valuable new skills and a rewarding purpose throughout the pandemic.

“Ben sees dog walking as his job and enjoys it enormously,” Ben’s mother Jenny said.

“The shelter has supplied him with a uniform and provided a work permit, which he has to carry with him at all times ‘on the job’, and he has an NDIS support worker to accompany him.

“It’s been great for skills development, which might seem a funny thing to say about dog walking, but it’s helped him learn how to schedule time, to keep a routine and to meet expectations.

“So, for example, he knows he has to keep the dogs to the left on the footpath, and to pick up poo and dispose of it safely. That then flows through to an increased ability and willingness to take on other responsibilities, including chores at home and self-care.

“He has been improving so much and just come such a long way. And there’s no question he wouldn’t be where he is without the NDIS.”

With continued NDIS supports, including speech, occupational and psychology therapies, Ben has been pursuing a host of other creative goals too.

He’s making a detailed documentary about his life, and planning and cooking healthy meals for his family several times a week.

“Ben has been improving because he’s had all these NDIS supports and therapies throughout the pandemic, and he’s been able to continue the dog-walking,” Jenny said.

“Ben has recently started working for an estate agent doing a leaflet drop eight hours per week on award wages and is saving to buy his own car.

“His behaviour used to be explosive and unpredictable until the NDIS came along, which has given us the chance to take a breath as a family. He’s a lot happier within himself because as his language and communication improves, so does his confidence, and his anxiety has

reduced.”

Now that lockdown has ended, Ben is impatient to add to his list of accomplishments. He’s having driving lessons to convert his ‘L’ plates into ‘P’s to increase his independence.

“I want to drive to do things by myself,” Ben said. “For anyone who wants to learn to drive, I say go for it.”

Ben also wants to finish an animated Lego series, based on the Spy Fox video game.

Ben’s passions also include cars (he knows every Holden ever built and most other cars), movies (he can recite the year of release of most movies), AFL footy, guitars, and bowling.

He plays footy with the Ferntree Gully Eagles all abilities team and tennis and fitness group which he has missed greatly with lockdown. He has just started lawn bowls and loves the interaction with other players.

Meanwhile, Ben is also appearing in a video to celebrate this year’s International Day of People with Disability (IDPwD). Produced by the NDIA, the video will be broadcast on NDIS Social Media platforms on 3 December.

“I want people to see me as talented, independent, and handsome,” Ben said. “Most of all I just want opportunity like everyone else, I want people to see me just as I am.”

Ben's story showcases the impact we can all have when we see people for who they are and the things they can do.

To help celebrate the day you can download the IDPwD pack including a social media pack, poster, virtual meeting background and email signature block on the IDPwD page.

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