Charlie dances and swims his way to realise dreams and goals, with NDIS support

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When Charlie Wilkins takes the stage next month at South Australia's principal performing arts venue, the Adelaide Festival Centre, he'll be communicating to audiences the best way he knows how – through movement.

"It makes me feel happy," says Charlie, 22, who has Down syndrome and dances professionally with award-winning inclusive Restless Dance Theatre and is also a NDIS participant.

"Restless is like my other family. I enjoy making new friends. It means joy."

Photo by Shane Reid.

Charlie will perform for audiences in a new work titled Exposed, directed by Artistic Director Michelle Ryan, who invited Charlie to join the company professionally two years ago.

"Charlie's skill level has increased incredibly over the past year and a half, and I think he is really shining at the moment and developing as an artist," Ms Ryan says.

"Charlie will have a key role in Exposed, which explores vulnerability, uncertainty and risk."

From the time he could walk, Charlie was moving and grooving to his favourite tunes.

"Charlie has always danced, from when he first heard music, as soon as he was on his feet, he was dancing," Charlie's mum Angela Basedow recalls.

"When he's dancing with Restless, he is in his zone, in this happy place. He is just hearing the music inside him and completely immersed in it."

It wasn't long after he started dancing as a young child that Charlie started swimming too.

Today, Charlie is not only a professional dancer but also a world champion swimmer.

Representing Australia at the Abu Dhabi 2019 Special Olympics World Games, Charlie brought home silver in the 50-metre freestyle relay and gold in the individual 100-metre backstroke.

"It feels really good, feel happy and joy," says Charlie, proudly showing off his medals. "I laugh, I never see my mum crying like that before."
Angela admits seeing Charlie on the podium brought tears of pride to her eyes.

But, she says, it's not what brings her the greatest joy about Charlie's triumphs.

"As a parent, none of the medals or achievements really matter, it's all about being part of an inclusive community – inclusion is what matters," Angela says.

“Charlie now also trains with a mainstream swimming club, Onkaparinga. He calls Restless his dance family and Onkaparinga his swimming family. They are such an inclusive and welcoming group and Charlie is just one of the guys.”

Since he joined the NDIS four years ago, Charlie has been supported to pursue his goals as both a professional dancer and competitive swimmer.

He uses funding through his NDIS plan to attend professional dance training and has support workers to access his community, including travelling to and from dance and swimming training.

“Charlie is 22 and he doesn’t want his mother taking him everywhere,” Angela says. “It means he can be independent and hang out with someone who’s more of a friend.

“It also means I can continue with my work as an anaesthetist. Without the NDIS, it would be very difficult for me to do that and Charlie would not have that level of independence.”

In June, Charlie will travel with Restless to Melbourne for six weeks to develop a new dance piece.

“Charlie will have NDIS support to be able to go away on tour and I can rest assured he’ll have the support he needs,” Angela says.

“To be able to have the opportunity of dance being more than just a hobby, to be able to develop it beyond that so the passion can become a career, is just incredible.

“All any parent wants is to see their kid happy and you just hope that they get a job doing something they love, and this is just next level, this degree of happiness.”

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