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It’s taken hard work, discipline and a rugged determination, but young South Australian business owner Tom Neale has been proudly proving people wrong since he left school five years ago.

“No one except Tom and us had any vision for him – there were no expectations for him,” Tom’s mother Helen recalls. “When he was preparing to leave school, we were told the only options for him would be day options or assisted disability employment.

“But they were never going to be enough for Tom. That sort of repetitive work would have been problematic for him, he needed something more.”

Pursuing his dreams for rewarding employment, Tom has built a thriving Micro Enterprise, aptly and creatively named Ground Control by Major Tom.

He now has a regular clientele, doing what he loves most – mowing lawns.

“When I was younger, I wanted to mow lawns, that’s what I wanted to do,” says Tom, 24, of Mitcham, who has autism.

“I enjoy being outside, I like meeting people and having the routine. I like earning money, that’s good too.”

With support through the NDIS and NDIS provider, Community Living Project (CLP), Tom has achieved his goal of creating a sustainable business that provides him with meaningful employment and a sense of purpose.

“It’s about finding work that is rewarding and giving people a dignified answer to that common question “What do you do?” says, Helen. “Tom has a sense of pride and achievement in what he does.”

Except for a few weeks of lockdown, Tom has continued to keep his clients’ lawns in shape throughout the pandemic.

“It’s important because in the mornings it gives me something to get up for,” Tom says. “I like having that purpose.”

With support from CLP’s Micro Enterprise Project (MEP), funded through his NDIS plan, including a support worker who helps him get to his jobs and assists him with some tasks, Tom has improved his social, communication and business skills and steadily grown a firm client base.

“I like it (the NDIS support), I think if I didn’t have that, I wouldn’t have as many opportunities,” Tom says.

Now with about 60 regular clients on his speed-dial, Tom has fine-tuned his lawn-mowing skills and trims up to seven lawns a day, three times a week.

He has saved enough money from his profits to buy his own trailer and has been learning to safely load and unload his equipment.

At the end of each work day, Tom organises his schedule for the next day, messaging his customers to confirm their bookings.

“That has been something new he has learnt to do as well, so it’s all contributing to his sense of achievement and purpose,” Helen says.

Meanwhile, Tom has also been increasing his independence by building other life skills with help from NDIS support workers, including learning to shave and doing the laundry.

He recently achieved a life-goal by successfully obtaining his L-plates.

“The flexibility of Tom’s NDIS plan is just brilliant, it has enabled Tom to learn independent skills and to spend time doing things he really enjoys,” Helen says.

With support, Tom has been finessing another important skill and long-held passion – woodworking.

Last year, he provided his sister and family with an unforgettable moment.

Tom’s sister Hannah and her partner Zak exchanged their wedding vows framed by a magnificent hand-carved arbour, built by Tom.

“The arbour was Tom’s wedding gift to his sister and partner, which was very special,” Helen says. “We are so proud of Tom and all of his achievements. It was a very special moment for all of us.”

On World Autism Day, Tom has a message for the wider community.

“I have autism, it does make some things hard but it’s a part of me, it isn’t only who I am,” he says.

“I don’t really like it when people say I’m “suffering” from autism. I have autism and I have some challenges, but I’m not suffering. I have a great life.”

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