Actor and model Oli hopes milestone TV role drives change on screen

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At six, he was scuba-diving in Bali. By 12, he was representing Victoria in wheelchair basketball.

Now 19, East Brighton actor, model, para-athlete and disability advocate Oliver Pizzey Stratford has become the first wheelchair user with a disability to appear in Australia's iconic TV show, Neighbours.

Oliver, who is a quadriplegic and supported by the NDIS, hopes his debut role on Ramsay Street not only motivates other young people with disability to pursue their dreams, but also sends a message to TV and film producers around the globe.

"Hopefully, this episode and milestone reaches further than Neighbours and is a signal to people in Australia and people worldwide – casting directors, producing teams, everything alike – that people with disabilities can absolutely act, they can absolutely be involved, and also, they're bloody good at it!" he says.

Oliver, or Oli as he is known, became a quadriplegic after sustaining a spinal injury during birth.

Ever since, he has been overcoming challenges, including multiple high-risk spinal surgeries.

All this, while charming the people around him with his optimistic, can-do attitude.

Though doctors believed he wouldn't survive – and when he did, that he would never breathe alone – Oli went on to do about 40 scuba dives in Bali between the ages of six and 12, alongside his parents and a divemaster who also used a wheelchair.

Now balancing an acting and modelling career, Oli also coaches wheelchair basketball, plays tennis with the Australian para-tennis team, has his sights set on competing in either tennis or athletics at the Paralympics, and is a motivational speaker for schools and corporations.

He's a passionate disability advocate who also offers his time freely to anyone who would like to speak with him about living with disability.

"He's just a force of nature," Oli's mum Georgina says. "He's an extremely motivated and caring young man and he's just relentless."

Oli agrees his determination and motivation are second nature but, he says, life would be a lot more challenging without the support of the NDIS.

Through his NDIS plan, Oli has funding for physical and occupational therapies; regular intensive rehab camps with Gold Coast NDIS provider Making Strides; smart assistive technology devices at home to increase his independence; a sporting wheelchair for tennis; and a support worker, who helps Oli in numerous ways, including accessing his community.

“There’s no doubt there would be a lot more headaches without the NDIS,” he says.

“The ability to go to a facility like Making Strides and not have to worry about how to properly fund that is incredible and really liberating because you can focus on your health and making sure you are the best version of yourself that you can be.

“I’m eternally grateful for that and for all the therapies and supports that I have. The fact that I can use my voice to control the lights or open a door or turn on the TV, it gives you a level of independence you didn’t previously have.”

Oli has been modelling and acting for several years but describes his new TV role as the highpoint of his career.

“I’ve always wanted to be that person who sort of paved the way, and so for it to come to fruition in this sense is humbling and just mind-boggling. It’s something I wanted to do so badly and for it to come true is just amazing,” he says.

“I never had representation of someone in a wheelchair with a disability on TV as an actor growing up, and the thought that someone might see my episodes on Neighbours, someone young and impressionable who has a disability and can relate to that, that’s bigger than any role that I get, I mean that’s truly amazing to me.”

Oli hopes his experience will inspire other young people with disability to reach for the stars.

“What I would say to young people with disability is this is a time for change – they’re looking for people like you to get involved in every facet of life, in every little bit of life, so if you’re interested in sport, if you’re interested in acting, if you’re interested in singing, it’s the absolute time to get involved because the world is changing for the better, the revolution is starting,” he says.

Oliver on the set of Neighbours for his ground-breaking appearance.

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