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Able to engage a mentor artist to support him with his NDIS funding, Mal James has produced an array of colourful and creative artworks and recently held his very first exhibition at local art space, Redrock Books and Gallery.

Using coloured pencils on paper in an abstract fashion with remarkable results, the 46-year-old Natimuk resident, who has an acquired brain injury and other psychosocial disabilities, said he was overwhelmed to get the opportunity to publicly display his work.

“The opening was fantastic. I couldn’t believe how many people were there to see my artwork and to support me – friends, neighbours, relatives,” Mal said proudly! Even my 2 sisters and my nephew drove from Melbourne to support me, and feedback was great.”

Mal’s mum, Lynne, said while she never expected her son’s artwork to go down this path, it’s been wonderful to see Mal build his skills and confidence and be recognised in his community as a talented artist.

“12 months ago, an exhibition to showcase Mal’s artwork would never have crossed our minds,” she said. “I think Mal would have been happy just showing his drawings to whoever wanted to see them.

“In fact the thought of having an exhibition would have made him quite anxious, but now with all the support he’s getting he’s more confident and extremely proud of his artwork.”

Lynne said Mal’s mentor artist Anthony Pelchen has been at the forefront of her son’s new-found success, mentoring him twice a week in a comfortable safe studio with an array of art supplies ready for him to articulate his most inner thoughts and emotions.

“Largely this has all happened for Mal through Anthony’s support and direction,” she said.

“Anthony has encouraged Mal to move out of his comfort zone. He’s now stretching himself and willing to try new things. It’s all worked out really well.”

Blown away by the depth of Mal’s artwork and how far he has come Anthony said he was happy to support his prodigy to work towards holding his first art exhibition.

“Mal is very talented. His drawings are intriguing, and this first exhibition has been an important step in giving him the exposure he deserves,” he said.

“Arranging an exhibition isn’t easy. It takes a lot of time and it’s costly, but I knew it would be worthwhile, so I supported Mal to apply for an Accelerate Art Grant through Art Access Victoria, which he received. It helped him frame 20 artworks, a huge achievement for any artist!

“Having Mal’s artwork professionally framed and presented took it to another level. The works were given their full voice and people were intrigued,” Anthony said.

“Now Mal has sold a few and Horsham’s Centre of Participation has approached him to ask if it could display some of his artworks on its walls. It’s such a great result.”

Growing up misunderstood and described as “original” and “unique,” Mal said his anxiety made it hard for him to keep friendships and it was challenging for him to fit in with society, but Lynne added his NDIS funding and his move from Melbourne to be closer to her has really helped to get his life back on track.

“Through Housing Vic we were able to get Mal a fully self-contained unit built in my backyard and through the NDIS Mal has another support worker who comes in twice a week to help him cook, clean and shop,” Lynne said.

“Also having Anthony mentor Mal with his art twice a week has helped him to form friendships, feel valued and more connected to his community.”

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