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Ocean Grove NDIS participant Lucy Carpenter is getting much more out of life with Dottie, her new Guide Dog, then ever before.

The 19-year-old, who has low vision, said she feels less isolated, safer leaving home independently, and more enthusiastic and energetic about life.

Dottie has helped Lucy feel more comfortable on public transport and more confident attending her university lectures in Melbourne.

Lucy said Dottie has also broken-down social barriers. When she is out in public with her black fluffy companion by her side, she is now enjoying greater inclusion.

“Prior to Dottie, I found it hard to meet new people, especially at university,” she said.

“I would walk up with my cane, and we would head into class, but everyone would see my cane, know what it was for and never bring it up. Conversation-wise it made it awkward.

“But now I have Dottie she’s an easy conversation starter. People engage with me way more and I feel that awkwardness has gone.

“When Dottie is with me, I haven’t had a single day where someone hasn’t spoken to me.

“They ask her name, they comment on how beautiful she is and what great work Guide Dogs do, then we get into a conversation. It’s been really nice.”

While Dottie has been life-changing for Lucy, not everyone is considered suitable to work with a Guide Dog. The main criteria is good cane skills.

“People don’t realise how much goes into getting a Guide Dog. I was on Guide Dog Victoria’s (GDV) waiting list for a while, then I had to do 2 extensive assessments to see if I was suitable to work with a dog or not, all before I was matched with Dottie,” she said.

“At my first assessment, a Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (GDMI) watched me walk around familiar and unfamiliar areas using my cane to evaluate my skills. Then in my second assessment the GDMI held a Guide Dog harness handle next to me and I had to walk alongside him holding it so he could assess if I could follow a Guide Dog or not.

“The GDMI also assessed my walking speed and how much tension I liked on the handle to see

if I was comfortable with a dog who pulled me or if I didn’t like that feeling. There were also a lot of discussions about my needs and to match me with the right dog,” Lucy said.

Finally, Lucy did get the all-important call of a possible match, Dottie.

“I was so excited. They brought her down to me to see if we matched, and I felt the connection straight away,” she said.
“When we took our first walk, Dottie did everything right and it made me feel really good.”

Confident in their match, the GDMI sent the pair off to Melbourne with 3 other people and their newly matched Guide Dogs.

“We did 14 days of intensive training around the city with the GDMI. Navigating the streets and hoping on and off public transport to see how our dogs performed with us. It was really good,” Lucy said.

“Then when we arrived home, we had one-on-one training with the GDMI, then once we got the tick of approval, we were off on our own.

“We still have a few little creases to iron out, but Dottie has made me feel more energetic and enthusiastic about life. I’m more confident, less isolated and I feel much saver when I travel alone.

“Dottie and I are a great team and now I can’t imagine life without her,” Lucy said smiling.

Note: The NDIS assesses each participant’s funded supports based on their individual needs and circumstances in line with the NDIS Act 2013 and Our Guidelines.

Supports or assistive technology (AT) funded in a participant’s plan must be safe for them to use and in no way harm them or those around them.

The disability supports and AT/equipment featured in this article are only likely to be suitable for NDIS participants with specific requirements.

For information on disability supports including AT, participants should seek advice from their health professional and discuss their personal circumstances and needs with their Partner in The Community or support coordinator.

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