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For Sydney teenager Aspen Luke, 2 paths connecting to share a message of solidarity and pride with the world is a march worth making.

Aspen - who identifies as queer, is autistic and has 22.q13.32 duplication - will proudly be on Autism Spectrum Australia's (Aspect) float at Sydney's WorldPride and Mardi Gras parade.

As a neurodiversity, disability, and LGTBQIA+ advocate, Aspen said helping to shine a spotlight on disability and pride would be an opportunity not to be missed.

"Being autistic and queer, there's a lot of intersections between our communities. A lot of autistic people identify as queer or trans, so, being in the float, really sends a message of inclusion," Aspen said.

"It's also nice to be with a community of people who are accepting, and that's really cool."

This year marks a third parade for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participant, who used his funding for a mobility aid last year to help him take part.

For Aspen, continuing to show his support means the world, after finding inclusion and belonging in the communities he will be representing.

"I grew up presenting as a girl up until I was 14. It was difficult growing up in mainstream schools and I was very much bullied and targeted," Aspen said.

"I questioned my gender and questioned things about expressing my true self. I didn't know much about the transgender and queer community. I knew it existed, but it wasn't taught in schools, and we were left in the dark.

"Then, I became more involved with the queer community, and it's been close to 3 years now I've identified as transgender."

After making the decision to leave school, Aspen has been doing advocacy work within the autistic and queer communities for the last 2 years.

"It really picked up last year. I write lots of articles and also work with Aspect Australia and with Twenty10, which is the queer youth service of New South Wales. I'm part of their queer leadership team," Aspen said.

"I have social media pages and spend my days writing content and doing interviews. I'm so much happier now."

Aspen uses sensory aids such as noise cancelling headphones and fidget toys to support his sensory needs and emotional regulation.

Living with chronic illnesses and 22.q13.32 duplication, which causes a range of issues including persistent pain and an unstable heart rate, Aspen uses a wheelchair part time, as well as other mobility aids.

Aspen said becoming an NDIS participant in 2021 had allowed him to thrive in work and beyond.

“Before the NDIS, I was really struggling. We found it hard to afford the things I needed, such as mental health supports,” Aspen said.

“I have physiotherapy fortnightly, and I’m about to start occupational therapy and exercise physiology.

Therapies have helped slow down my issues and have made me stronger.

“The NDIS also funds a communication device which helps me vocalise when I’m not speaking and having difficulty communicating.”

Aspen has also connected with support worker, Raven. Part of the autistic and queer communities, Raven, who is funded through the NDIS, has helped Aspen grow his independence and social capacity.

“I’ve become good friends with them. They sometimes take me shopping, but most of the time they sit and spend time with me. I get lonely, so it benefits my mental health,” Aspen said.

When Aspen’s not working or with family or Raven, indulging in his love of bugs, insects, and all things specimen, is an important hobby. As is caring for his pet tarantula, 26 fish, 2 snails and soon enough, a scorpion and millipede too.

However, with a room full of pride and disability flags, Aspen loves nothing more than learning about, or talking about the autism, disability and queer community and spaces.

After 2 years of the Mardi Gras Parade being at the Sydney Cricket Ground, Aspen is looking forward to its return to Oxford Street.

In familiar territory on the back of Aspect’s float, Aspen said he was looking forward to showing others the importance of just being yourself.

“You don’t have to fit into any set label or group, you can be or do whatever you want to be,” Aspen said.

“Society puts a lot of social constructs onto us. If you want to break those constructions, do whatever you want and be yourself.”

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