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Birrong National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participant Neilo Ferreira is a bit on the shy side, but thanks to Gig Buddies volunteer Jan Ireland working with him one-on-one and taking him places he’s out spreading his wings socially.

Neilo, 52, has learning difficulties but it hasn’t stopped him from clocking up an impressive 26 years working full-time as a storeman/parts packer at City Ford and doing most things independently.

Neilo gets up at 5:15am, catches a bus and a train to work. It takes an hour each way and he arrives home at 4pm. He then helps his elderly mum around their family home.

Looking to expand his social network Neilo used his NDIS funds to engage disability provider ACL Disability Services who introduced him to Gig Buddies, a service matching him with a “buddy” to support him to enjoy greater social inclusion. That buddy was Jan.

‘I like going places with Jan. We go to the movies, bowling and we go out for dinner. It’s nice to have someone to go out with,’ Neilo said.

According to Jan the feeling is mutual. ‘I really enjoy Neilo’s company too,’ she said.

‘My husband passed away 15 years ago. I’m on my own and volunteering to support Neilo socially has helped me to widen my own social circles. It’s helped us both tremendously.’

After being matched on their shared interests, age and how close they lived to each other, Jan and Neilo said they clicked instantly.

‘We’ve talked about it, and we just hit it off. It’s weird. I was saying to Neilo the other day I feel like I’ve known you for years. He said the same thing. We just find it really easy to talk to each other and we enjoy each other’s company,’ Jan said.

‘Gig Buddies like you to go out together once a month, but Neilo and I go out more than that. Sometimes we go out 2 or 3 times a month. It just depends on our availability.

‘We also text each other a lot to say hi and he sends me random jokes. He’s hilarious.’

Jan said Gig Buddies also organise lunches and dinners where everyone is invited.

‘The last one we went to was at a club in Parramatta. Neilo was sitting down the end of the table, so I encouraged him to move up and join in on the conversation. He did. It was so good. We are making progress building his confidence and social skills. It’s wonderful.’

Neilo’s brother Joe said having the NDIS funding to engage Gig Buddies has been great for his brother, who hasn’t felt comfortable or confident mixing in social settings for years.

‘We can see Neilo really enjoys Jan’s company, and their friendship is really having a positive effect on his confidence and general well-being,’ he said.

‘Just by being in Jan’s company Neilo is experiencing and being exposed to things he wouldn’t normally of had the opportunity to do.

‘I’m really looking forward to seeing his confidence continue to grow,’ he said.

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