THE Advocate

A VOICE FOR ACCESSIBLE, EQUITABLE AND EMPOWERED LIVES | SUMMER 2025/26 ISSUE

GAME ON

3 Brisbane activities that are fully accessible and seriously fun

The NOSE knows

Inside the world-first human trial that could change spinal cord injury forever

HARD RESET

Neil Kenny's journey back to work – and full strength

En garde!

Meet wheelchair fencer Sam Blade – and discover Queensland's newest adaptive sport

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF Spinal Life AUSTRALIA

Proudly partnering with Permobil to keep Australians moving

Move Mobility is proud to partner with Permobil, a global leader in powered wheelchairs and seating systems.

Together, we're bringing world-class innovation and trusted local support to help Australians stay independent and on the move.

- Full Permobil Range Available — Explore the latest M- and F-Series power chairs, cushions, and seating systems.
- Expert Local Support — Our trained technicians and clinicians understand your needs and provide on-the-ground service across South East and Central Queensland.
- Custom Assessments — Individual trials, fittings, and setup support for every user.
- Fast Delivery & Repairs — Local workshops and a dedicated service team to keep you moving.

Wherever your journey takes you, our experienced team is here to help you find the right equipment.

Visit us in **Robina**, **Logan Hyperdome**, **Bundaberg** and **Rockhampton**

Call us: **1800 860 495**

Shop online: **movemobility.com.au**

MOVE MOBILITY | permobil

IN THIS ISSUE

4 QUESTIONS WITH THE CEO 4

FEATURES

From nose to nerve 6
On the rise 7
Let the good times roll 10
Best in show 14

SPORTING WHEELIES

Sharp moves 16

BACK2WORK

A year like no other 20

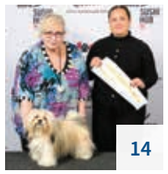
ADVOCACY

How to ask for an NDIS plan review 22
Not happy with your review? 23
App-solutely fabulous 24

HEALTH

The power of prep 26
AT a glance 27
Digging deep 28

STAFF PROFILE 30
NEWS 32
THE LAST WORD 34



Editor | Rachel Toune
Writer & designer | Ginny Cumming
Publishing and Printing | VRC Printing

Cover image by Stephen Lawrence

To gain permission to reprint any material that appears in The Advocate, please contact theadvocate@spinal.com.au or 1300 774 625.

The views expressed in The Advocate do not necessarily reflect the views of Spinal Life Australia. Spinal Life Australia takes no responsibility for equipment, products or service/s advertised in The Advocate.

Wishing you all a happy holiday season

As we approach the festive season, I hope you're staying well and finding ways to keep cool during the summer heat and humidity.

We recently completed our annual member engagement survey and were delighted to see that 73% of respondents intend to continue their membership, our strongest result in three years. *The Advocate* magazine continues to be the most valued aspect of membership for the third consecutive year, closely followed by our monthly email updates.

Among our advocacy efforts, the campaign for accessible housing remains the most recognised, followed by our call for a National Year of Accessible Tourism – an initiative aimed at making travel more inclusive for everyone.

The survey also revealed continued interest in attending Peer Support Catch Ups in the past year, showing how important these connections are to our community, and making us eager to expand into new regions.

As we go to print, our Annual General Meeting (AGM) has just taken place. I'm honoured to be re-elected to the Board of Spinal Life Australia and look forward to continuing to lead the organisation through exciting projects and key milestones. Thank you to every member who took part and voted, and for your ongoing trust and support.

Summer in Australia also brings the potential for severe weather, including storms, heatwaves and bushfires. Please make sure you're prepared and have an emergency plan in place, particularly if you need additional support. If you receive Personal Support or Home Care Services with us, your Client Service Officer will also reach out to check in. You can find some useful tips on Page 32.

In this issue, you'll read about Griffith University's groundbreaking human clinical trial exploring cell-based transplantation and long-term rehabilitation for people with spinal cord injuries, an incredible advancement happening right here in Queensland.

We're also featuring member Charmaine's top picks for accessible adventures in Brisbane, a look into the exciting world of wheelchair fencing with a Paralympian, and plenty more, from dietitian tips to NDIS advice and assistive technology insights.

As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts and feedback at **chair@spinal.com.au**. And I'd like to wish you and your loved ones a safe, happy and restful holiday season.

GYL STACEY

DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?

Email us at **theadvocate@spinal.com.au** – we'd love to hear from you!

4 QUESTIONS WITH THE CEO
Mark Townend

1. Can you tell us what's new at Spinal Life?
We're very excited to be expanding our Back2Work program into the community, starting in South East Queensland. The program has been running for more than nine years and has supported hundreds of Queenslanders in hospital to return to work or study after a spinal cord injury.

Back2Work has previously only been available to people with newly acquired spinal cord injuries who were inpatients of the Spinal Injuries Unit at the Princess Alexandra Hospital, generously supported by funding from Queensland's Motor Accident Insurance Commission (MAIC). Recently, we broadened the program's reach to include other health and hospital services.

We're now making the program available to NDIS and NIISQ participants, and others in the community who are motivated to find employment or further education – whether they are newly injured or have had a spinal cord injury or damage for several years and are now looking for a change.

2. What's the latest on the Brisbane Precinct?
We're continuing to progress our vision for a purpose-built, one-stop location for people with spinal cord damage and other physical disabilities, and I'm thrilled to share that we've now secured a site for the new Brisbane Precinct.

Located near the Princess Alexandra Hospital, the Precinct will bring together accessible accommodation, a fitness hub, hydrotherapy pool, and health and rehabilitation services, all under one roof. It's designed for people transitioning out of hospital, as well as for those living locally or visiting Brisbane for appointments.

We've received strong interest from potential partners and collaborators, and we're confident this project will deliver significant benefits for members, government, research partners, and the wider community. With development approval already in place for our existing Woolloongabba site, we're well positioned for a high-value land sale that we can reinvest in the new Precinct and ensure it meets community needs well into the future.

3. Can you share more about Spinal Life's recent media advocacy?
We recently spoke out following the release of details about the federal government's spending on private law firms for NDIS Administrative Review Tribunal hearings, which was more than $60 million in 2024–25, up 60% from the previous year. It's deeply concerning to see so much funding directed to legal costs while most participants and families are forced to represent themselves, facing unnecessary stress and lengthy delays.

We continue to advocate for change, to cut through red tape, and to ensure people with disability have timely access to the supports they need to live safe, healthy lives, and be recognised as a valued part of our community.

4. What else has been happening?
We recently welcomed a team from QUT to our Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane for a fascinating demonstration of the G1 humanoid robot. The team is part of a national research program exploring how humanoid robots could improve independence and inclusion for people with disability. It's exciting to collaborate on projects like these that push boundaries and create new opportunities for our community.

As always, I'd love to hear from you – please reach out to me anytime at **ceo@spinal.com.au**. I wish you and your families a Merry Christmas and all the very best for the New Year.

Above: A G1 humanoid robot impresses Spinal Life staff at the Healthy Living Centre in Woolloongabba.

Empowering people with disability to live more active, independent lives through:

- Highly trained personal support and in-home care
- Tailored allied health therapies and services
- Active, social and supportive communities
- Partnerships with other NDIS providers
- Advocacy to create better access, equity and inclusion.

Call 1300 774 625
enquiries@spinal.com.au
spinal.com.au

Spinal Life AUSTRALIA

From nose to nerve

A world-first Gold Coast trial is using nasal cells to help repair injured spinal cords

For decades, the story of spinal cord injury hasn't changed much: once nerves are injured, they don't grow back. Now, a new Phase 1 clinical trial led by Griffith University is daring to challenge that belief, pairing cutting-edge cell transplantation with months of targeted rehabilitation to see if function can be coaxed to return.

The therapy centres on remarkable cells hidden inside the nose. These olfactory ensheathing cells help new smell nerves regrow and reconnect – a process that happens throughout life. Scientists believe those same guiding abilities could help repair damaged pathways within the spinal cord.

In the trial, surgeons will take a tiny nasal biopsy from each participant. In a specialised Brisbane facility, the cells will be multiplied and formed into a delicate 'nerve bridge', then implanted into the spinal cord during surgery at Gold Coast University Hospital.

But the operation is only half the story. Each participant will commit to 11 months of intensive neuro-rehabilitation – three months of 'priming' beforehand, and eight months of 'regenerative' rehab afterwards – delivered by partner centres including Making Strides (Gold Coast), Royal Rehab (Sydney), and The Next Step (Melbourne). That work is designed to encourage any possible reconnection, then reinforce it.

Because this is an early-phase, blinded and randomised study, participants will be assigned to one of two groups: a treatment group receiving both the transplant and rehabilitation, and a control group completing the identical rehab program without cell transplantation. Staff completing measurements of the trial participants won't know who is in each group – and participants are encouraged not to tell.

Interest in the trial has been extraordinary. Since Expressions of Interest opened, more than 500 people have already applied – a number that continues to grow. EOIs will remain open for several years as eligibility gradually expands to include people up to four months post-injury and those with ASIA C-level injuries, once safety data from the first participants is available.

For now, the initial phase focuses on adults with chronic, traumatic spinal cord injuries at the C5–T12 level (ASIA A or B) at least one year post-injury. An independent physiotherapist is currently contacting applicants to confirm eligibility before shortlists are created. From that group, the Principal Investigator at Gold Coast University Hospital will select the first two sentinel participants – one to receive both the cell transplant and rehabilitation, and one to undertake rehabilitation alone.

No one is promising miracles – the primary goal of Phase 1 is to assess safety, feasibility and acceptability. Secondary goals include assessing early efficacy, and carefully measuring changes in movement, sensation, autonomic function, independence and quality of life. Yet the gains being chased are anything but small. As lead scientific investigator Professor James St John notes, "Even regaining a little function can be life-changing – a finger that moves, steadier transfers, better bladder or bowel control. Independence grows from there."

This moment is also a tribute to the late Professor Alan Mackay-Sim and to years of community-backed research driven by organisations including the Perry Cross Spinal Research Foundation, the Clem Jones Foundation and government partners.

It's early days, and rigorous science takes time. But for those first participants preparing to begin their long months of rehab and review, this trial represents something powerful: evidence-based hope – and a chance to help write a new chapter in life after spinal cord injury.

For more information or to register your interest, visit: **griffith.edu.au/sci-nerve-bridge-trial**

On the rise

After a life-changing accident, builder Jiah Spinks-Summerell is helping his family create something new

As researchers explore new frontiers in spinal cord repair, people like Jiah "Milky" Spinks-Summerell are watching with keen interest. The 32-year-old father of three from Murwillumbah in Northern New South Wales has already registered his name for the landmark clinical trial featured on the opposite page – not because he expects a miracle, but because he believes in helping build one.

Before his accident, Jiah's life was full throttle.

"I worked, hung out with the kids, played soccer on weekends and went to the gym five days a week," he says. "I was very, very active and we were always doing something as a family."

A carpenter by trade, Jiah built custom homes for a Gold Coast construction company. He was the family's sole income earner, while his wife Jodie cared for their three young children – Amelia, now 10; Oakley, 6; and Armani, 5.

That ordinary, busy life changed in an instant on 22 October 2023. The day after his 32nd birthday, Jiah joined 30 mates from his gym for the Raw Challenge, a muddy obstacle-course event at Numinbah Valley.

"It was my first time doing one of those things," he says. "I'd just turned 32, so it was also a birthday present to myself. Yeah, happy birthday… you're about to spend the rest of your life in a wheelchair."

Jiah with his youngest child, Armani, now 5, at the Princess Alexandra Hospital.

On the very first obstacle, Jiah jumped into a mud pit, which was thigh-deep. "Then I did the same thing on the next obstacle, but that one wasn't deep at all," he recalls. "I landed belly first and broke my neck."

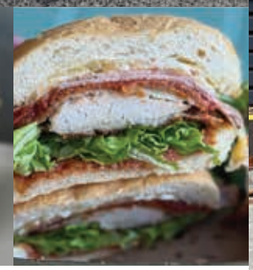
Face-down and unable to move, he began to drown in the thick mud until his mates realised he wasn't mucking around and actually couldn't move – or breathe. They rolled Jiah over, kept his airway clear and waited for paramedics to arrive. A rescue helicopter then airlifted him to the Princess Alexandra Hospital (PA) in Brisbane, where surgeons fought to stabilise his shattered spine.

Jiah spent his first month in the PA's Intensive Care Unit, followed by seven months in the Spinal Injuries Unit.

"I had two major surgeries – one through the back of my neck, one through the front," he explains. "They took out my C5 vertebra and replaced it with titanium, then fused everything from C4 to C7 with bolts and screws."

Doctors warned Jodie that "the movement your husband goes into surgery with is the movement he'll come out with." At that point, Jiah could only move his head.

"When I woke up, I couldn't move anything. I knew it was bad," he recalls. >



This page: Xzavier with three of his biggest supporters – his children (from left) Amelia, Oakley and Armani. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The sign welcoming visitors to Sip 'n' Bite Bakehouse; Xzavier and his wife – and baker extraordinare – Jodie, inside their Murwillumbah café and bakery; the Spinks-Summerell family; Some of the tasty treats on offer at Sip 'n' Bite Bakehouse.

The official diagnosis: a C5 ASIA B-level spinal cord injury – incomplete quadriplegia.

But Jiah defied expectations. "As time went on, I started getting movement back in my arms," he says. "I've got altered sensation through my whole body now. I have some movement in my arms – but not my hands – and I don't have triceps, so transfers are tough. But I've had a lot more recovery than the experts thought I would."

While Jiah was in hospital, Jodie shouldered everything at home – including the children and the house – as well as making the long drive to Brisbane three or four times a week to be with her husband.

> "My middle child wouldn't come near me or drink from my water bottle in case he 'caught what I had'. That broke me."

"Jodie started off coming up to see me every day, but she simply couldn't keep that up," he says. "We've got three little ones to look after, it's a big trip and it cost a lot – and I wasn't working anymore."

And so, friends, family and his employer rallied with fundraisers. Eventually, Jodie found a longer-term solution: she turned her love of baking into a small business.

"She'd been experimenting with cookies and brownies before my accident," says Jiah. "Afterwards, she decided to make a real go of it."

Earlier this year they opened Sip 'n' Bite Bakehouse in an industrial estate in Murwillumbah, selling coffee, pastries and lunches to local workers.

"It's perfect for grab-and-go trade – pies, sausage rolls, cookies, sandwiches, plus we've got a wholesale side, supplying cafes and an RSL Club," he says. "We've got one other staff member, Jodie starts at around 3 or 4am, and I go in at about 8 or 9."

Jiah mans the till, using a stylus strapped to his hand with Velcro. "My carer takes me to work and brings me home again in the afternoon, and during the day helps me out in the bakery – he's basically my arms and legs."

This arrangement also lets Jiah be part of school life again. "I do the morning school run and I'm home when the kids get back," he says. It also represents real progress – because, of all the changes since the accident, none cut deeper than the impact it had on his children.

"My eldest, Amelia, understood what happened and she was sad but okay, and my youngest was too little to know what was going on," he says. "But my middle child, Oakley, was old enough to realise something was wrong, but too young to understand. It hit him the hardest – he wouldn't come near me, wouldn't sit on my lap, wouldn't drink from my water bottle in case he 'caught what I had'. That broke me. We were inseparable before the accident – we did everything together."

Oakley's come around now – and is "extra cheeky" according to his relieved dad – but the memory still stings. "He's my little shadow again, but it took time."

When Jiah finally left hospital, he was determined to do it on his terms. "They wanted to keep me until the bathroom renovations were finished to make our home accessible, but I discharged myself early," he says. "Even if it meant using an outdoor shower pod every morning for three months, it was still better than being in hospital."

Almost immediately after discharge, Jiah began twice-weekly sessions at Making Strides, the Gold Coast neurorehabilitation centre that's partnering in Griffith University's new cell-transplant trial.

Things were going well – and then Jiah's NDIS funding was cut.

"Some people are lucky enough to go to the Making Strides gym five times a week," he says. "I was doing two sessions – and then the NDIS told me it 'wasn't value for money' and cut me back to just one session a week."

They're fighting the decision, because the Making Strides gym is so beneficial to his physical *and* mental health. The community has become a real anchor. "When you're out with friends or family, no one really gets what you're going through," he says. "At the gym, everyone's in the same boat. They all know what you're going through, so they can relate to you and you can relate to them. In an ideal world I'd go five days a week."

Between the bakery, rehab and family life, Jiah's days are full again – if not in the way he once imagined.

"We're going pretty good," he says. "Some days are better than others. But I wake up every morning, remember what's happened and think, 'Right, this is still my life – get on with it'."

That determination is what led Jiah to submit an Expression of Interest for Griffith University's nerve-bridge clinical trial.

"I put my name down straight away," he says. "They can put me in now – I'd be happy to be their guinea pig!"

Jiah's story highlights exactly why the Perry Cross Spinal Research Foundation exists – to fund and fast-track projects like this trial, in the hope that independence will one day be restored to people living with paralysis.

He's realistic about timelines and knows that science moves slowly, but is hopeful about what the result of the trials could mean for others as well as himself. Even the possibility of regaining something as small as the movement of a single finger – to scratch his head, hold his wife's hand, or hug his children properly again – would be life-changing.

"If this research helps people down the track, that's what matters. Someone's got to go first," he says.

In the meantime, Jiah and Jodie are keeping their focus on what's next. "We've got the kids, the bakehouse, my rehab," says Jiah. "It's a juggle, but we're doing it."

Visit Sip 'n' Bite Bakehouse at 141 Lundberg Drive, South Murwillumbah, New South Wales or follow them on: **instagram.com/sipnbite_bakehouse**

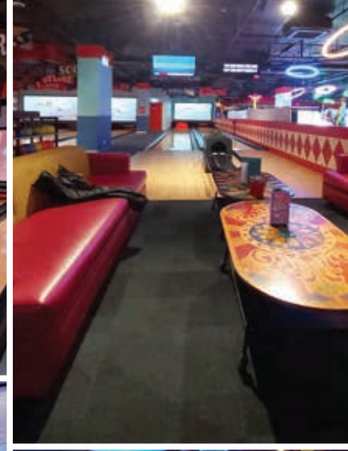
Let the good times ROLL

It's access all fun as Charmaine Idris explores accessible adventures in inner city Brisbane

Turning 70 inspired me to reconnect with my inner youth – to ditch my comfort zone, say yes to new experiences and rediscover the joy of play and immersive activities.

So I set out to explore some of Brisbane's most accessible venues – places where creativity, coordination and teamwork all come into play. From axe throwing and ten-pin bowling to an escape room that put my problem-solving skills to the test, each experience reminded me that it's never too late to try something new.

Join me as I check out three of the city's most inclusive and entertaining spots...



Clockwise from this pic: Step right up! The entrance sets the playful tone; Giant video screens light up the bowling lanes; A vibrant spot to relax between turns; Charmaine takes aim at one of the arcade games; The clever wheelchair-friendly ramp attachment makes bowling accessible.

Archie Brothers

3/30 King Street, Bowen Hills

The words "Welcome to the Circus" glowed in bright lights as I rolled into Archie Brothers – a fitting entrance that instantly evoked childhood memories of the old Ringling Bros. Circus (albeit without the wild animals). The word that sprang to mind was vaudeville.

Billed as 'part arcade, part bar, part neon-drenched playground,' Archie Brothers is a dazzling, delightful venue, popping with a kaleidoscope of colour, and offering everything from bowling and karaoke, to virtual reality and classic arcade games – some can even be played while seated in a wheelchair.

I headed to the ten-pin bowling area, tastefully decked out in retro décor and large enough to accommodate groups comfortably. Music videos played on huge screens suspended above the bowling lanes, and the whole area was surrounded by brightly coloured bowling balls and signs urging players to 'score,' 'strike' and 'roll-up'.

Tracie, my support person, and I entered our names – I was 'Wheelie Diva'; she was 'All Thumbs'. To bowl, I used a metal ramp attachment fixed in front of my wheelchair, with angled brackets that let me guide the ball straight down the lane. It took a few trial runs to master the technique, but the warm-up was part of the fun. Friendly taunts and non-stop laughter kept us both in stitches, though the competition stayed fierce. I led for most of the game until a misjudged roll in the seventh frame handed Tracie victory – by just three pins.

Adaptability: Ten-pin bowling requires patience and control, but once I got the hang of it, I was addicted. The art is knowing how to guide the ball down the ramp while judging just the right amount of force. I chose the lightest ball, kept both feet firmly planted on my foot plate, shuffled forward just slightly, engaged my core and sat as upright as possible. I'm hooked!

Accessibility: The main entrance is accessible via an inclined timber ramp, with both the door and ramp wide enough for a wheelchair. Inside, it's mostly flat and easy to navigate, with only the occasional carpeted section. The ramp leading to the bowling lanes is carpeted. There's one accessible bathroom with a wide entrance and grab rails on the left.

Snacks & seats: A cosy seating area beside reception offers sit-down meals, snacks, cocktails and shakes. The extensive menu includes pizzas, burgers, share plates and sides, with dietary options available – and meals can be served right to your lane while you bowl.

Parking: On-street paid parking surrounds the venue; the nearby King Street Car Park is a good alternative. >

Fox in a Box Brisbane

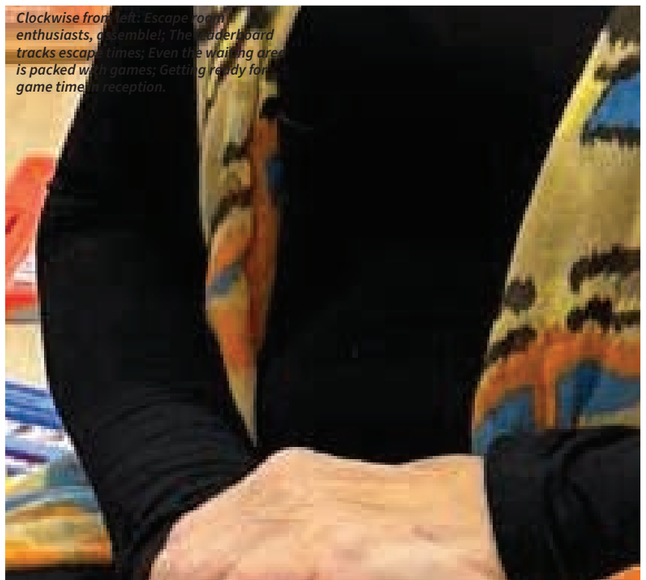
Level 1/150 Edward Street, Brisbane

This blink-and-you'll-miss-it escape room venue on Edward Street might just be one of Brisbane's best-kept secrets. Part of a global network of 33 locations (headquartered in Sweden), Fox in a Box challenges players to work together, think creatively and solve intricate puzzles before time runs out.

Each themed room has its own mission – from stopping a nuclear explosion in *Bunker* to creating a cure in *Zombie Lab* or escaping *The Zodiac Killer*. It's 60 minutes of total immersion where logic and teamwork are key.

It was mid-afternoon on a rainy day when my support person and I entered the venue – which was already heaving with fellow escape room enthusiasts. We were there to tackle *Zombie Lab*, a clinical, pure white space, where the puzzles were complex, the clock was relentless, and teamwork was essential – collaboration was definitely the key to unlocking the impressive clues that would help us find a cure to stop the impending Zombie pandemic. But the clues weren't in sequence and not everything was as simple as it appeared – red herring alert! It was an immersive experience like nothing I ever imagined and I'm gutted to admit that we didn't save the world... but we had a blast trying.

Adaptability: *Zombie Lab* offered plenty of room to move, with most clue stations strategically placed within easy reach, but I was glad I had my support person with me to reach the higher clues. And if you're keen to try another escape room, be aware that space and layout vary between experiences:
• *Bunker* and *Mastermind Heist* are the most wheelchair-friendly (the latter best with four players or fewer).
• *Prison Break* requires three players and involves an element of separation, so having a support person is recommended.
• *Zodiac Killer* and *Tesla's Mystery* feature some transitions between spaces through hallway doors rather than internal room passages, which ensures narrow doorways are avoided.
• *Zombie Lab* and *Chamber of Lost Legends* have some narrow transitions which might restrict wheelchair navigation, so call ahead to check suitability.
Accessibility: Entry is via a glass door on the ground floor, which does require assistance to open, followed by a wide lift to the first floor. The carpeted areas are flat and easy to roll over. The accessible bathroom is on the ground floor and requires a key, so you'll need to allow additional time to get there.
Snacks & seats: The reception area features a mix of lounges, low and high tables, and bar stools. Light snacks and drinks are available to enjoy before or after your game.
Parking: There's no on-site parking, but King George Square car park is nearby, and public transport stops are within easy reach.



Clockwise from left: Escape room enthusiasts, assemble!; The leaderboard tracks escape times; Even the waiting area is packed with games; Getting ready for game time in reception.

Clockwise from far left: Charmaine shows off her axe-wielding form; Taking aim for the perfect throw; The bold, black-and-white interior at Newstead; Twice the fun, twice the focus in a double lane; Sage advice from Maniax.

Maniax Axe Throwing

52a Doggett Street, Newstead

Established in Sydney in 2014, Maniax is Australia's first and largest urban axe-throwing company. With venues across several major cities, around 750,000 people have visited Maniax – or, in other words, around 40 million axes have been thrown (with, barring the odd splinter, no significant AXE-idents – pun intended).

I set out to become an AXE-pert at the Newstead venue, which has a warm, grunge-style vibe with high ceilings, exposed wooden beams, black-and-white wall art, and smooth, easy-to-navigate floorboards.

There are two types of throwing spaces: a single lane, where you throw solo, or a double lane, where you can take on a friend. In both, a trained 'AXE-pert' guides you through every throw. There are three axe sizes to choose from: being a newbie, I opted for the lightest one. Brett, the friendly venue manager, showed me the best position for my wheelchair, and the best way to hold and throw my axe. Its final trajectory is, apparently, determined by the way you hold it (single- or double-handed), the height of your arm at the time of release, and your projected aim on the bullseye. According to Brett, it's "similar to playing darts!"

After several failed attempts I eventually got the hang of it. A strong core and some upper-body strength is helpful, but not crucial to the overall experience, which was memorable and so much more fun than I had anticipated. Just be sure to wear comfortable clothing and closed-toe shoes.

Adaptability: Axe throwing is surprisingly adaptable for wheelchair users. I used a two-handed throw with both feet on my footplate, and using my back rest for additional lower back support, which gave me better control and balance. I also tried placing my feet on the floor for extra stability, but without back support, this made balance trickier – so find what works best for you.
Accessibility: The main entrance is accessible via an inclined concrete ramp, and the interior layout is flat and wheelchair-friendly. Doorways are wide, and it's easy to move between lanes and seating areas. There's one accessible bathroom with a wide entrance and grab rails on the left.
Snacks & seats: Snacks, pizzas and beverages are available on site. Seating consists mainly of high stools and bar-style tables, so wheelchair users may need to reach up for food and drinks.
Parking: There's no on-site parking, but timed parking spaces are available on the surrounding streets.

Visit the following websites for current entry fees, package options and to book online – Maniax Axe Throwing: **maniax.com.au/location/newstead#/booking-start** (free entry for Companion Card holders and support persons). Archie Brothers Cirque Electric: **archiebrothers.com.au/locations/bowen-hills** (free entry for Companion Card holders and support persons for ten-pin bowling only). Fox in a Box: **foxinabox.com.au/main/index#our-rooms** (free entry for Companion Card holders and support persons when visiting in groups of three or more).

best in show

After 12 years and a life-changing diagnosis, dog breeder Alison Brady is back in the ring at last

When Alison Brady arrived at the 2025 Royal Queensland Show (aka the Ekka), it was a moment more than a decade in the making – and one worth celebrating. Twelve years earlier, she'd been preparing to show her beloved dogs at her first Ekka after years on the local circuit. But just two weeks before her big debut, Alison collapsed, was rushed to hospital and spent three and a half months fighting to understand why her body had suddenly stopped cooperating.

The eventual diagnosis, delivered after countless tests, was multiple sclerosis.

"I'd been misdiagnosed for years," says Yeppoon-based Alison, who'd been told she had everything from arthritis to lupus to a 'cascade' of strokes. "Then, in 2013, I was suddenly paralysed down my left side. Everything I'd planned – showing dogs, travelling, normal life – just halted."

For Alison, a former nurse and sports massage therapist, it was a devastating blow. "MS has taken everything from me. It's taken my career, it's taken friendships, it's taken my ability to travel, my marriage, and my independence, both financial and personal," she says. "But the one thing it hasn't taken is my dogs."

She'd always been animal-mad, but a chance encounter years earlier led Alison to Lhasa Apsos, the 3,000-year-old Tibetan breed once kept as inner-temple sentinels in monasteries and palaces. "My mum met a breeder in a shop and, before I knew it, I was the owner of a Lhasa Apso," she laughs. "And that was it – I fell in love with the breed."

It was a perfect twist of doggy destiny, given Alison's deep connection with Tibet itself. In 2005 she spent five weeks travelling through the region – visiting monasteries, trekking to Mount Everest Base Camp, and later spending a week in Nepal. "It was a spiritual and exhilarating trip, but also tough," she says. "I didn't know I had MS then and I pushed too hard."

Alison says she'd always felt drawn to Tibet. "When I finally got there, I felt completely at home – more so than in Australia. I felt like I'd been there before." Local monks seemed to sense the same thing. "Everywhere I went I was offered blessings and gifts, and one monk said it was because I'd been there in a past life – 'Alison.. last life... monk' were his exact words!"

That trip left an indelible mark. "I came home intending to go back to Nepal and study Buddhism, but life and illness got in the way," she says. "While I never made it back, I did study Buddhism, and it still informs how I cope with MS. I just try to breathe, accept the day I've got, and be grateful – I'm particularly grateful that I live in Australia, a country that looks after its disabled people through the NDIS."

It even influenced what she named her first Lhasa Apso: Tara, after the Buddhist goddess of compassion. "Tara was my first, and she changed everything," Alison says. "She lived a long, happy life, and because of her I now have six Lhasa Apsos who bring me joy every day."

Alison breeds on a very small scale – "only five litters in 12 years" – but her careful attention has produced dogs with exceptional temperaments and show potential. Earlier this year, one special litter of five arrived. All were assessed and deemed to be show-worthy; four have since achieved Australian Champion titles.

And so it seemed like 2025 was the perfect time for Alison to finally make it to the Ekka. Along with a support team she headed to Brisbane with her beloved pup Nyima, and Nyima's litter sisters Lilly and Ayla, who are owned by a friend of Alison's. "The plan was simple: turn up, enjoy it, and see what happens," she recalls. "I honestly didn't care where we placed. Just being there after 12 years was enough."

The results exceeded every expectation. In the morning show, Lilly took Best of Breed, Ayla was Runner-Up, and Alison's young Nyima placed third; the trio repeated the result in the afternoon. "We won the trifecta that day," Alison says proudly. "To finally make it back to the point I was before being diagnosed with MS was so special."

She credits her recovery to determination – and to the people who helped her along the way. "It's all thanks to the NDIS and Spinal Life," she says. "I *love* Spinal Life. My Plan Managers, Support Coordinator and Occupational Therapist have all been a key part of my journey."

As she is Plan Managed with Spinal Life, Alison is able to source and employ her own support workers. Apart from helping Alison personally, she has also trained them to wash and groom her dogs – which is vital now she can't stand for long periods. They even take the lead in the ring when she can't. "If it wasn't for my support workers, the Ekka simply would never have been possible," she says.

Travelling to dog shows around Queensland is now a well-honed operation for Alison and her canine crew. A support worker drives, an accessible motel or dog-friendly Airbnb is booked, and the team tackles two Saturday shows and one Sunday show before heading home. "It's doable with planning," says Alison. "And it keeps me out in the world."

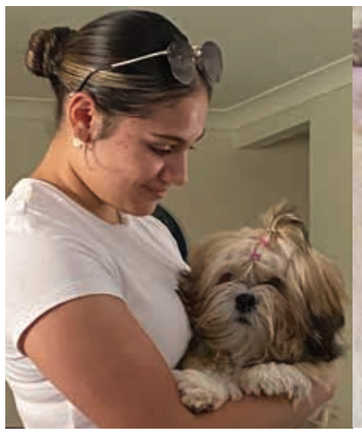
> "My dogs enhance my life and give me purpose."

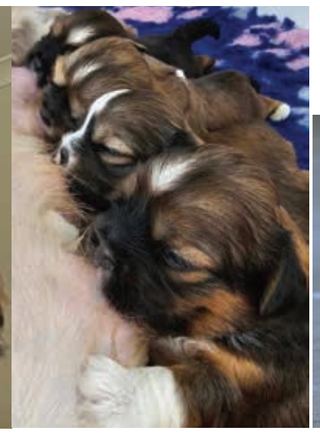
That world – the dog community with its gazebos, gossip and good-natured rivalry – has become Alison's social lifeline. "We set up side by side, share a cuppa, swap tips, and cheer each other on," she says.

And then there are her beloved dogs, who provide companionship, motivation and therapy. "They give me a reason to get up and keep moving," says Alison. "They help improve my fitness, lower my stress and distract me from pain. I'd do more for them than I ever would for myself. They enhance my life and give me purpose."

So what's next for Alison? More local shows when health allows, perhaps another careful litter, and a continual focus on rehab – always with her dogs by her side. "MS is progressive – you keep losing physical capabilities as time progresses," she says. "There are lots of things I can't do now, but I *can* still breed carefully, plan a show, teach a handler, and be there for my dogs. I can't change my diagnosis, but I can choose how I live with it."

Visit **spinal.com.au** to learn more about our services.





Opposite page: Alison Brady (left) and Nyima at the 2025 Ekka, along with support worker Tahlia Horvat. This page, from left: The gorgeous Nyima (show name: 'Sengkyila Dakini it's Destiny') with handler-in-training, Mikaela; Four of the five pups in Nyima's litter; Lilly winning Best of Breed at this year's Ekka.

Sharp moves

Wheelchair fencer Sam Blade has the perfect name for the sport – and the moves to match

Fast, strategic and surprisingly graceful, wheelchair fencing sharpens focus, strength, coordination and confidence – delivering an exciting test of skill and precision in every bout.

Sporting Wheelies has just launched Queensland's first wheelchair fencing program at its clubhouse in Milton, and interest in the sport is at an all-time high in the Sunshine State. To mark the occasion and learn more about this intriguing pursuit, we spoke to Australia's highest-ranking wheelchair fencer, Sam Blade.

Sydney-based Sam, 27, took up this dynamic and tactical sport about five years after he was diagnosed with Friedreich's ataxia (FA), a genetic, degenerative disease of the nervous system that slowly affects balance, movement and muscle control.

"I was born with FA, but we only found out about it when I was 15," he says. "Early on we put my coordination and balance problems down to clumsiness and growth spurts. Then they thought I might have MS, but eventually, after about a year of tests with a neurologist, they told me I have FA."

Sam will never forget that fateful day.

"I don't know if they missed their coffee that morning, or were late for a meeting, but the person who broke the news to me did not do it very well," he says with a sigh. "They said: 'You're progressively going to get worse, you won't be able to walk, talk, eat or drink properly, and by the time you're in your 30s you're going to have heart issues and then die.' They basically just said, 'Yeah, you have FA, you're screwed... off you go'."

It had a devastating effect on Sam.

"I was essentially given a due-by date, and it really screwed me up," he says. "I couldn't function at school. I kept thinking, 'What's the point?' The teachers didn't know what to do with a chronically depressed teenager, and I didn't know what to do with myself, so I just left."

Sam spent the next couple of years "just floating about – I kind of stagnated and didn't do anything with my life. It was a horrible time."

Finally, at age 17, after much research by his ever-supportive parents, he was put in touch with the leading FA research centre, located in Melbourne.

"They gave me my life back," says a grateful Sam. "They set me up with a plan of action and I actually started living again."

Central to that plan was exercise.

"With FA, exercise is key in slowing progression," he says. So I stick to both gym work and neurophysio. It helps my body, but it also helps my mindset and keeps me feeling in control."

A few years later, following the advice and encouragement of his father, Sam also took up wheelchair fencing: "I was never a sporty kid, but I was hooked from the start," he says. "I loved it."

Between university, COVID disruptions and a few serious injuries, Sam's parafencing journey wasn't always consistent. But in 2023, a new program at his club, the Sydney Academy of Fencing – with plans for upcoming competitions – drew him back to the sport.

"For me that was a game-changer, because it gave me something specific to work towards," he says.

With his debut set for the 2024 Asian Championships in Thailand, Sam ramped up his training, often spending four hours a day at the Academy, five days a week, in preparation.

This first outing on the international stage saw Sam enter the world rankings at number 63 – an encouraging start to his para fencing career. He went on to compete at the Wheelchair Fencing World Cup in Italy later that year, and this year at the Para Fencing World Cup in Indonesia, in September.

"Indonesia was amazing and it was a brilliant venue," says Sam. "I didn't do as well as I wanted performance-wise, but my ranking did go up, so now I'm 50th in the world – my goal is to crack the top 30 within the next 12 months."

As this issue goes to print, Sam is preparing to head to Thailand for the 2025 World Abilitysport Games. Looking ahead to 2026, he hopes to compete at events in Thailand, Japan, Europe and hopefully one day in Iran, the homeland of his mother.

Looking further ahead, Sam has his sights set firmly on the 2028 Paralympic Games in Los Angeles and, even more so, the Brisbane Games in 2032.

"But we need more fencers," he adds. "At the moment, my club is the only one in New South Wales offering wheelchair fencing. I think there's one in Victoria too, and now there's the Sporting Wheelies program in Brisbane, which is amazing. I don't want to be the number one male Category A fencer in Australia anymore – the more fencers, the better!"

So what's the appeal of this sport that's sometimes known as 'high-speed chess' because of the strategy and rapid decision-making it requires?

"Well, it's not as elitist as you might think – able-bodied fencing might still have that reputation, but para fencing is very diverse and welcomes everyone – I love that," he says. "Plus, you get to hit people with a sword, with no repercussions!

"But seriously, I think it's the super-fast pace. You don't have time to think about anything but the game – nothing else matters in that moment. There's such an explosive energy and you have to outwit, outspeed and outpower your opponent. It's an adrenaline rush."

And, for Sam, the true reward runs even deeper.

"The main thing wheelchair fencing has given me is structure," he explains. "If you're struggling, it's a good place to find your footing. It's almost like an anchor – otherwise you're just flailing about in the ocean and you'll eventually drown. Para fencing helped me gain confidence in myself, both physically and mentally, and it continues to give me opportunities to gain skills and experience that translate into real life. Honestly, if I didn't do it, I don't know where I'd be. I don't want to *think* where I'd be. Wheelchair fencing may be a sport, but it's so much more than that."

The Sporting Wheelies wheelchair fencing program is open to all – no experience is necessary. All gear is supplied, you'll get expert coaching, and it's even NDIS-friendly. For more details, go to: **sportingwheelies.org.au/sports/wheelchair-fencing**

m|d community

Quality that's affordable

Save money for the things that count, without compromising on quality. Try the m|devices Hydrophilic Nelaton Catheters with Water Sachet.

m|devices Hydrophilic Nelaton Catheters with Water Sachet

Affordable
Priced to be competitive against all major brands

Comfortable
Hydrophilic coating supports lubricant free insertion

'All-in-one' Product
with no touch sleeve and easy peel packaging

Scan to order your free sample today

m|devices®

Always read and follow instructions for use, visit www.mdevices.com.au for further information.
Products sold through most leading distributors.

Catheter confidence

Top tips on how to navigate self-catheterisation at home

If you've been recommended intermittent self-catheterisation, using a Nelaton catheter, you're not alone – many people use this safe, effective method to manage their bladder function. With a little practice and embedding a few good habits, self-catheterisation can become a simple part of your daily routine.

Here are some simple tips to help you comfortably self-catheterise:

Stay clean
Always wash your hands before and after the procedure and clean your genital area thoroughly each time to reduce the risk of infection.

Use new catheters only
Never reuse catheters. Always use a sterile, single-use Nelaton catheter for every insertion.

Choose Hydrophilic catheters
These are coated for smoother insertion and more comfort. Consider the m|devices Hydrophilic Nelaton with water sachet.

Avoid contamination
Don't touch the end of the catheter that enters the bladder, and don't let it touch any surfaces. If this happens, discard it and start again with a new one.

Don't overfill the bladder
Aim to empty your bladder before it is too full. The bladder's capacity varies but generally it should not hold more than 350–500ml. Overstretching the bladder increases the risk of infection and leakage.

Stay hydrated
Drink 6–8 glasses of water a day (unless advised otherwise). Dehydration can lead to infections and concentrated urine.

Get the right size
Using the correct catheter size helps prevent discomfort and ensures efficient drainage. Your healthcare provider will guide you on the correct size for you.

Watch a how-to
For visual help, visit mdevices.com.au/personal for video support or check-out the illustrated instructions on using m|devices Nelaton catheters.

Never force it
If you experience resistance or pain when inserting, stop and seek medical advice.

Seek help if needed
If you're getting infections often, despite following all hygiene steps, consult your healthcare provider.

Though it may feel intimidating at first, most people find that with time, self-catheterisation becomes second nature. Follow these simple steps, and you'll be managing your bladder health confidently and safely in no time.

Learn more at: **mdevices.com.au**.

A year like no other

After a devastating illness left him fighting for his life, Xzavier Mendelson is back on his feet, back at work – and looking forward to fatherhood.

When 22-year-old Beaudesert local Xzavier Mendelson fell violently ill in February 2024, he had no idea how drastically life was about to change.

"It started with vomiting – I couldn't keep anything down, even water," he recalls. "Then I couldn't urinate. I went to hospital three times before they realised something serious was going on. By then, I couldn't walk."

Doctors diagnosed meningitis, transverse myelitis and encephalitis – an extremely rare combination that attacks both the brain and spinal cord.

Within days, his body shut down. "No one thought I was going to survive, but I managed to pull through."

When he finally woke after multiple surgeries and being placed in an induced coma for a week, Xzavier couldn't move, stand or feed himself. "I didn't know if I'd ever be able to do anything again – nobody could tell me if it was a permanent thing," he says.

"But I was determined to walk again," says Xzavier, who was then just 20 years old, and celebrated his 21st birthday in hospital. "I just wanted to get home, be with my family, work on my car and get back to work."

When it came to rehabilitation, Xzavier acknowledges he was "very motivated" and spent two to three hours doing physiotherapy every day for months.

The progress came in stages: first a wheelchair, then a four-legged frame, then a crutch, and finally a walking stick. "By the time I came home, I barely used the wheelchair," he says. "My mum and my partner, Maddy, looked after me through everything. Maddy kept the house running and paid the rent while I was in hospital."

By October 2024, Xzavier was walking independently – and by the following month, he was back on the job. "Before I got sick, I'd been a labourer and welder, building bridge sub-frames," he says. "I lost that job when I got sick, but my dad helped me get a new one with Marsh Air, where he works as an estimator."

Now an apprentice installing commercial ducted air-conditioning systems, Xzavier is thriving. "Everything's pretty much back to normal," he says. "I'm climbing ladders, doing everything I used to do. The only thing that's ongoing is my bladder – I still use self-catheters – but compared to where I was, that's nothing."

He's also back in training, studying for a Certificate in Engineering and Fabrication Trade at TAFE Queensland Acacia Ridge. "It's a four-year course and I'm doing it part time while working full time," he explains. "My employer's really supportive – they book the study blocks and pay me while I'm there."

While recovering in Brisbane's Princess Alexandra Hospital, Xzavier was referred to Spinal Life's Back2Work project, where he met Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor, Julie Hall. "Back2Work were the only people who'd take me on back then," he says.

Julie worked with him to manage the ongoing effects of transverse myelitis – including a T11 spinal fracture that will never fully heal – and to help him safely re-enter the workforce. "Julie helped me get a back brace for support and a cooling vest for summer, which is a lifesaver on hot days," he says.

Julie says Xzavier's attitude made him stand out. "He's a lovely young man and very proactive," she says. "At first he didn't know how his body would cope with work, so he started slowly – a couple of days a week – and built up to full time. Once we knew what kind of job he'd be doing, we organised the cooling equipment because transverse myelitis affects temperature regulation – and Queensland summers are no joke! We were also recently successful in getting him a heated jacket for winter, so he's all set for next year."

> "No one thought I was going to survive."

Through the Back2Work program, Julie also helped secure funding through the Hall Foundation for equipment and training resources. "My role was to take away some of that stress – finding what funding was available, handling the paperwork, and helping him plan strategies for day-to-day life," she explains. The result? Xzavier now has a computer that will be invaluable as he studies at TAFE.

Julie also hopes Xzavier's story shines a light on invisible disabilities, and the long-term effects that remain, even when someone looks "recovered".

"It's important to highlight people who can walk, but still live with the complications of paralysis – things like bowel and bladder issues, temperature regulation and nerve pain," she says. "Those invisible challenges are still life-altering."

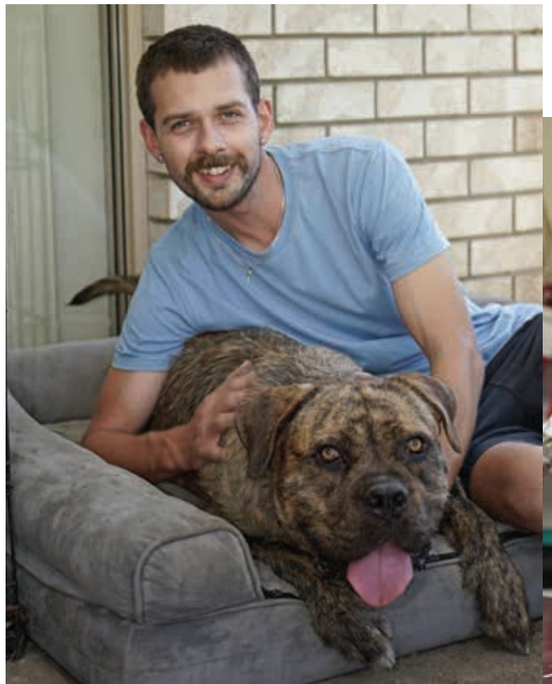
For now, Xzavier's life is full – in the best possible way. "A week or two after I got home from hospital, I got a puppy – the idea was that it would help me from getting too depressed being at home. He's a mastiff-bull Arab cross called Gizmo... but he's not much of a puppy anymore!"

Even bigger milestones were to follow. "On the third of August this year, Maddy and I got engaged," he says with a grin. "And then two days later we found out she was pregnant. It's been quite a turnaround." Their first child is due in April 2026.

"It's a bit crazy," he laughs. "It's all happened so fast – the house, the dog, the job, study, getting engaged, and now a baby on the way. When I was lying in that hospital bed wondering if I'd ever walk again, I never imagined this would be my reality less than two years later."

Julie's pride in his progress is clear. "It's been such a pleasure to watch Xzavier rebuild his life – he's worked so hard to get here and has done everything we've discussed and followed through on every goal," she says. "To see someone go from being in a coma and having to learn to walk again, to working full time and starting a family – it's just amazing."

Spinal Life's Back2Work project is offered to newly injured patients while they're in the Spinal Injuries Unit at the Princess Alexandra Hospital and other select hospitals, thanks to the support of the Motor Accident Insurance Commission (MAIC). The program will soon be launched in the community too, for people with spinal cord injury or damage who would like to use their NDIS funding or other means to seek this invaluable support. For more details, go to **spinal.com.au/back2work**



Opposite page: Xzavier is back at work and also studying at TAFE. This page, from left: Xzavier with his beloved 'puppy' Gizmo; Maddy and Xzavier with the first photo of their first child, due in April 2026.

How to ask for an NDIS plan review

Top tips on how to make this important request

Your NDIS plan is designed to support your goals and changing needs – but life doesn't stand still. Illness, new circumstances or changing supports can all mean your plan needs to be reviewed. Knowing which type of review to request – and when – can make the process smoother and ensure you continue receiving the right supports at the right time.

This step-by-step guide explains the different kinds of plan reviews, how to prepare, what evidence to gather, and where to send your request. Whether your plan is ending soon, your needs have changed, or you disagree with a decision, these tips will help you understand the process, stay organised and make the most of your NDIS funding.

1. Identify the type of review needed

Type	When to use	Timeframe
'Plan Reassessment' (sometimes called a 'Scheduled Review' or a 'Participant Check-in')	The plan is ending soon or needs updating	Usually within the last three months of the plan
'Change of Details or Change of Situation' (sometimes called an 'S.48')	Life changes affecting support needs, (e.g. health, housing, informal supports)	As soon as possible after the change
'Request for a Review of a Decision' (sometimes called an 'S.100')	To review a funding decision you disagree with	Must be lodged within three months of the decision
'Plan Variation'	When you need to make minor changes to your plan (e.g. changing to Plan Managed or changing a goal)	You can ask for a variation at any time

2. Gather supporting information

Collect documents that explain why a review is needed:

- Updated medical or allied health reports (e.g. occupational therapist, physiotherapist, psychologist)
- Evidence of a change (e.g. informal support breakdown, deterioration in function and mobility, increased therapy support needs)
- Functional assessments
- Current plan goals and how they have/haven't been met
- Letters of support from providers or family/carers

3. Complete the correct form

Situation	Form needed
You need a Plan Reassessment as your plan is coming to an end	An official form is not necessarily needed (the NDIS should contact you, or you can contact them)
You need a review due to a change in your details, support needs or situation	Change of Details or Change of Situation form
You disagree with a funding/ plan decision made by the NDIA	Request for a Review of a Decision form
You need to make minor variations to your plan	Change of Details or Change of Situation form
For help or more information, phone the NDIS on 1800 800 110 for guidance	

4. Submit your request via one of these options:

- Email: enquiries@ndis.gov.au
- Fax: 1300 488 636
- Post: National Disability Insurance Agency, GPO Box 700, Canberra ACT 2601
- Call: 1800 800 110
- In person: at an NDIS or Local Area Coordinator (LAC) office

5. Follow up after submitting your request:

- Record the submission date and method
- Contact the NDIS within 1–2 weeks if no response
- Ask for a reference number or confirmation email

6. How to prepare if a review meeting is scheduled:

- Bring a support person or advocate
- Have all evidence and reports ready
- Clearly explain how the current plan is not meeting needs
- Revisit goals – adjust or clarify if needed

7. Helpful tips

- Be specific: "I need more Core supports because I have lost informal care" is better than "I need more money."
- Link support needs to functional impact and goals
- Keep a copy of everything submitted
- Use clear, respectful communication and ask for help if needed.

Key contacts to help you ask for an NDIS plan review include: NDIS Contact Centre: **1800 800 110**, **ndis.gov.au**; Advocacy Support: **askizzy.org.au/disability-advocacy-finder**; Legal Support: Google your local disability legal centre; your Local Area Coordinator (LAC); and your Support Coordinator if you have one.

Not happy with your review?

Didn't get the result you hoped for? Here's how to take the next step

When an NDIS request for a review doesn't go your way, it doesn't mean it's the end of the road. You have the right to ask the Administrative Review Tribunal (ART) to take a fresh look at this decision, which is made by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA). Here's what you need to know about how the process works and what to expect.

What is the ART?

The ART is an independent national body that, in October 2024, replaced the former Administrative Appeals Tribunal. It reviews certain government decisions, including those made by the NDIA, and can:

- Confirm the NDIA's decision,
- Change the decision, or
- Send it back to the NDIA to reconsider.

The ART's aim is to be fair and accessible, helping people reach the "correct or preferable" decision under the law.

Who can apply?

You can apply to the ART if:

- You've received a declined request for a review decision from the NDIA, and
- You apply within 28 days of getting that decision letter/email.

If you miss the 28-day window, you can ask the ART for extra time – they'll allow it if there's a good reason. There's no fee to apply, and you don't have to use a lawyer (although if you'd like help that is still an option).

A step-by-step guide to the ART process

1. Apply online – Submit your application on the ART website or get help from the ART team to do it over the phone.
2. ART notifies the NDIA – The ART writes to both you and the NDIA confirming they've received your application.
3. NDIA sends the 'T-documents' – These are all the papers, reports and policies the NDIA relied on to make its decision – it can often run to hundreds of pages. The ART will forward them to you (and to your representative, if you have one).
4. Case Conference – This is usually held by phone or video about 12 weeks after you lodge your application. An ART Registrar will bring you and the NDIA (often represented by a lawyer) together to see what can be resolved early. You may be asked for extra evidence such as quotes, reports or assessments.
5. Directions and follow-ups – After each case conference the ART issues 'Directions' – instructions for what each side needs to provide or do before the next meeting.
6. Further case conferences or conciliation – Most matters involve two case conferences and sometimes a conciliation conference to try to reach agreement.
7. Full Hearing (if needed) – If there's still no agreement, the ART holds a formal hearing where each side presents its case. Hearings are less formal than court, but more structured than the earlier conferences. We recommend legal assistance if the matter goes to a full hearing.

Timeframe

Most matters take around six months from application to finishing the second case conference. A full hearing can take 12 months or more.

What happens to your NDIS plan while you wait?

Your current plan will stay in place while the ART review is underway. If you're worried about running out of funds, you (or your advocate) can ask the NDIA for a 'plan refresh' to keep essential supports going during the process.

Handy tips

- Apply quickly: You have 28 days from the internal review decision.
- Gather your evidence early: This includes reports, assessments and quotes for supports etc.
- Ask for help if you need it: You can represent yourself, or request the help of an advocate, family member, informal support or lawyer.
- Stay engaged: Make sure you reply to all ART emails and meet the due dates in the Directions.

Key terms	
ART:	Administrative Review Tribunal
T-documents:	All the material the NDIA used to make its decision
Directions:	Instructions from the ART about what needs to be done next
Case conference:	An informal phone or video meeting to try to reach agreement
Conciliation:	A structured discussion led by the ART to settle disputes without a hearing
Hearing:	A full hearing in the Administrative Review Tribunal, between the respondent (NIDA) and the applicant (participant)

For more help, visit the Administrative Review Tribunal (ART) at **art.gov.au** or call **1800 228 333**, or go to the NDIS website at **ndis.gov.au**. For advocacy support, reach out to your Local Area Coordinator, a disability advocacy service, or a lawyer experienced in NDIS matters.

App-solutely fabulous

This groundbreaking new app is designed to help people stay one step ahead of pressure injuries

Pressure injuries are one of the most common – and most frustrating – complications faced by people with spinal cord injury. They can develop quickly, are often hard to see without assistance, and if not caught early, can lead to hospital stays, infections and months of recovery. But what if identifying a pressure injury could be as simple as taking a photo on your phone?

That's the idea behind a new research project currently underway through The Hopkins Centre at Griffith University, in collaboration with Spinal Life and the Queensland Spinal Cord Injuries Service. The team is developing a smartphone app powered by artificial intelligence (AI) that could help people recognise the early signs of a pressure injury – and get support sooner.

The research team has already built the first version of the AI model and is now working on how the app will look and function in the real world. The goal? An easy-to-use tool where a person can take a photo (or upload one), answer a few quick questions, and receive information about the likely stage of the injury. The app could then generate a short report that can be shared with a GP, nurse or support provider – potentially saving time and catching issues earlier.

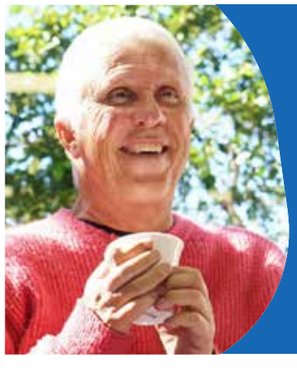
But before the app is finalised, the team wants to make sure it actually works for the people who will use it.

That's where you may come in.

The team is improving the AI by training it on more pressure-injury images. If you're a Spinal Life Australia client and would like your existing, on-file images included in the research dataset, please register your consent at the address below. Researchers are also inviting people with spinal cord injury to join a one-hour online interview to share what matters most, which features would help, and how the app can be most accessible and practical. Participants receive a $50 gift card.

Your experience could help shape a tool that supports independence, confidence and better skin health.

Register consent to use your on-file images at: **www151.griffith.edu.au/redcap/surveys/?s=Y3EDXYPJPMH3TDXA**; Register interest for the interview at: **www151.griffith.edu.au/redcap/surveys/?s=MY3PY8AFCMTJEM3J** or email the lead researcher, Dr Jayke Bennett: **jayke.bennett@griffith.edu.au**



Plan Management with a difference

Managing your NDIS plan shouldn't be a hassle – and with us, it isn't.
We work with all NDIS participants, regardless of disability type.
No stress, no complications – just expert help when you need it most.

Get in touch today!
1300 774 625 | spinal.com.au | enquiries@spinal.com.au

Spinal Life AUSTRALIA

Travel with Confidence: Self-Catheterising "On the Go"

100% NO TOUCH PROTECTION

VaPro Pocket™
Discreet pocket-sized package

VaPro Plus Pocket™
Discreet pocket-sized package with integrated collection bag

To experience VaPro™ catheters, please call our Customer Care team on 1800 880 851 or email priority@hollister.com.au

Hollister, the Hollister logo and VaPro are trademarks of Hollister Incorporated. © 2025 Hollister Incorporated. AUHC422. October 2025.

Hollister

Making a difference in the journey of life.

Dietitian Natalie Thompson (MNutrDiet, BHumNutr, APD, CEDC, Acc SD)

The power of prep

Simple, practical ideas to help make mealtimes easier

Meal prep can feel overwhelming when you're managing limited mobility – whether from spinal cord injury, stroke, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy or post-polio syndrome. But being able to put together simple, nourishing meals can make a huge difference to energy, digestion, bowel function and overall wellbeing. We asked Accredited Practising Dietitian Natalie Thompson to share some realistic, confidence-boosting meal ideas and kitchen tweaks that can help keep mealtimes manageable and enjoyable.

Building a balanced plate (without overthinking it):
Balanced meals don't have to be complicated – you don't need fancy recipes or long shopping lists. Aim for variety, and know that a bit of structure goes a long way. Small, balanced choices across the day help keep energy steady and support digestion. Use a portion plate model [see photo above] and try aiming for:

- ½ plate colourful vegetables or salad
- ¼ plate carbohydrates (bread, rice, pasta, couscous, potatoes, fruit)
- ¼ plate protein (meat, fish, chicken, eggs, tofu, beans, legumes, dairy or alternatives)

And for snacks, aim for one to three food groups, for example:

- Yoghurt with fruit
- Cheese and wholegrain crackers
- Nut butter on toast
- Boiled egg with veggie sticks

Kitchen tweaks for independence:

- **Prep from a seated position** to reduce fatigue – try a lap tray or lowered work surface.
- **Use adaptive tools** – things like rocker knives, jar openers, non-slip boards, weighted cutlery and anti-fatigue mats can help with grip and stability.
- **Reduce the trickiest parts of food prep** – by using pre-chopped or frozen veggies, canned fruit, cooked grains and pre-portioned proteins.
- **Try slow cookers & air fryers** – for great 'hands-off' cooking.
- **Stay hydrated** – keep a drink bottle nearby (consider easy-grip bottles or straws) and sip often.

Save time, save energy:

- Cook once, eat twice (or more!). For easy meals, batch cook when possible, and freeze the rest in single-serve portions.
- Lean on one-pot or tray-bake meals to simplify clean-up.
- When needed, use ready-to-go options like rotisserie chicken, pre-cooked rice, or NDIS-approved meal services.

Overcoming specific mobility challenges:

Condition	Common challenges	Adaptations
Spinal cord injury	Limited hand function, difficulty transferring in the kitchen	Adaptive utensils, pre-chopped foods, voice-activated appliances
Cerebral Palsy	Tremors, muscle stiffness	Weighted utensils, stabilising cutting boards, one-handed kitchen tools
Multiple Sclerosis	Fatigue, heat intolerance	Batch cooking, meal delivery, pre-portioned meals
Stroke	Weakness on one side, coordination issues	One-handed kitchen tools, non-slip mats, slow cookers
Post-polio syndrome	Muscle weakness, fatigue	Energy-saving strategies, meal planning

If you'd like more tailored ideas, an Accredited Practising Dietitian or Occupational Therapist can help you set up your kitchen; choose tools that suit your movement and energy levels; and plan simple, nutrient-dense meals that work for your lifestyle. There are also plenty of peer support groups (online and local) where people share practical cooking hacks that genuinely make life easier.

With the right tools and a little planning and support, the kitchen can become a space for nurturing and nutrition – not compromise.

Go to **delectabledietetics.wordpress.com** or **instagram.com/nataliethompson.dietitian** for more from Natalie.

Spinal Life Australia Assistive Technology Mentor, Jocelyn Stocker

AT a glance

How assistive technology empowers people to live life their way

Assistive Technology (AT) isn't all high-tech gadgets and futuristic gear – it's literally any tool or device that makes everyday life easier. And thanks to the boom in smart home technology, there are now more accessible, affordable options than ever before.

For some people, AT might be as simple as a jar opener that makes cooking easier. For others, it could be voice-controlled lights, automated blinds, smart speakers or adjustable kitchen setups. The best part? Many of these products are now mainstream, which means they're cheaper, easier to find, and often eligible for NDIS funding.

At Spinal Life's Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane, the person to see about AT is Jocelyn Stocker.

"My role is all about guiding, not prescribing," she says. "We don't sell products. We look at what you want to do, what's getting in the way, and how technology can help. Then we help you compare options, test things out, and learn how to use them confidently."

Small things can make a truly big difference. One of the most popular upgrades? Keyless entry systems. "For many people with hand dexterity challenges, keys are incredibly frustrating," says Jocelyn. "A digital deadbolt means no more juggling keys at the door – you just enter your code or use your phone. There are endless products like these designed to give you more comfort, more control and more independence."

For AT help, go to: **spinal.com.au/assistive-technology**

Spinal Life
Healthy Living Centre

A truly holistic approach to rehabilitation therapy

Benefit from a multi-disciplinary team approach towards improved mobility and increased independence.

Whether you're looking to increase your movement, improve your strength and flexibility, manage and reduce pain, or just want to stay fit and healthy, our team is on hand to support you with:

- Allied health therapies
- State-of-the-art equipment
- On-site driving clinic
- Assistive technology advice

At the Healthy Living Centre, all your therapy and rehab needs can be met in one convenient place.

Contact us today
1300 774 625 | brisbane.spinalhealthyliving.com.au
109 Logan Road, Woolloongabba

Digging deep

Following a tough battle with Guillain-Barré syndrome, Cairns local Neil Kenny is back at his FIFO mining job – and rebuilding his strength with help from the Healthy Living Centre

Photos: Romy Photography

Opposite page: Neil works on his balance and strength with Physiotherapist Tina Newton-Modlmayer. This pic: Neil wears his "Guillain-Barré Warrior" T-shirt with pride, a reminder of how far he's come.

Until late 2024, Neil Kenny's life was full and familiar. The Cairns local loved his work as a laboratory and environmental officer for a mining company, enjoyed weekends outdoors with his partner of 12 years, Rosemary Sciacca, and was looking forward to turning 50. Then, everything changed almost overnight.

"I had the flu – or what I thought was the flu – and took a day off work," Neil recalls. "A week later it got worse, so my GP gave me antibiotics and steroids for the cough. But on the evening of 3 October, everything went downhill fast. I couldn't swallow my dinner, my legs wouldn't support me, and I couldn't lift my arms to put on my pyjamas. I told Rosemary, 'This is something serious – you need to call an ambulance.'"

> "The atmosphere at the Healthy Living Centre makes you want to keep coming back."

After multiple tests and a spinal tap, neurologists at Cairns Hospital diagnosed Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) – a rare autoimmune disorder that causes the body to attack the network of nerves that carries signals from the brain and spinal cord to the rest of the body.

"I'd never heard of it," says Neil. "But I soon learned it's very rare and very serious."

He spent one week in the Intensive Care Unit, receiving intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIG) treatment to slow the damage to his nervous system. "I was almost entirely paralysed," he says. "I couldn't move my head, arms or legs. One side of my face dropped, one eye stopped working, and I couldn't speak or swallow. I was being tube-fed and had a catheter. It was terrifying."

Despite the challenges, he credits the ICU team with keeping him alive – and giving him hope.

Neil was transferred to the Rehabilitation Ward, where he spent the next five months. "There were nights I was in agony and couldn't sleep. I was grumpy and frustrated, which isn't me," he recalls. "I tried to stay positive, but at first, three people had to assist me using sling hoists and a wheelchair for showers and therapy. I couldn't even scratch my chin."

Through daily physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech pathology sessions, Neil's strength and spirit slowly began to return. "I had to learn how to walk, talk, eat and dress myself," he says. "I always pushed myself – I gave 110 per cent."

Before leaving hospital, Neil was approved for NDIS support and needed to choose a provider for his ongoing rehabilitation. "We picked Spinal Life – and it turned out to be a very, very good decision," he says.

Encouraged by hospital staff and his own research, Neil and Rosemary visited Spinal Life's Healthy Living Centre on the Cairns Esplanade. "It looked great, and had all the facilities and equipment I needed." he says.

A week after leaving hospital, Neil began his new rehab routine at the Centre's gym. "I was still so weak they had to use a sling and hoist to get me up off the mat. But that session marked the start of my recovery."

He began attending the gym three times a week, rebuilding strength and balance. "At first, I could barely lift two-kilo dumbbells. Now I'm using sevens, aiming for tens. I've put back 20 kilos of healthy weight and feel stronger every week."

Neil says that his main goal early on was simply standing up: "Even getting out of a chair was hard. I could walk, but if I fell, I couldn't get up without help. Now I can lift myself off the floor and carry things around the house. It's a huge improvement."

After six weeks of home rehab, Neil returned to his FIFO role at Cape Flattery Silica Mines, where he's worked for 18 years. His employer supported his return to work, his workmates rallied around him, and the Spinal Life physiotherapy team helped tailor an exercise program he could continue while on site.

"I took photos of all the machines in the mine gym, showed them to my exercise physiologist, Elbé du Plessis, and she designed a plan for me," Neil says. "Now I train there every second night when I'm on site, and keep my progress going."

On his weeks at home, Neil trains up to five times at the Healthy Living Centre – three with physio and two independently. "It's such a welcoming place," he says. "It's spacious, the equipment's modern, the staff are professional and friendly, and the atmosphere makes you want to keep coming back."

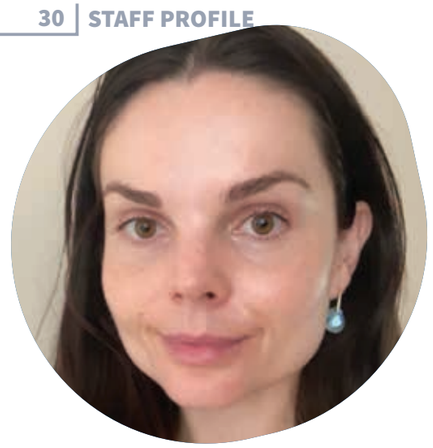
Neil's partner, Rosemary, who has a background in health and fitness, has been by his side through every stage. "She was my rock through it all," he says. "I couldn't have done any of this without her."

Just a year after being completely paralysed, Neil is back at work, back on his motorbike, and back to living life on his terms. "I love Enduro riding, and getting back on my bike was a big step. Every time I ride I improve and get a little bit more confident," he says. "When it comes to my recovery in general, I'm probably at about 75 to 80 per cent. It's slow, but steady. My goal is 100 per cent – and I'm determined to get there."

Neil still experiences pain and fatigue, but his outlook is pure optimism. "At one point I thought I'd never work again. Now I'm planning to stay at my job another 10 years. The support I've received at the Healthy Living Centre has been a huge part of that. My 12-month NDIS plan ends in February 2026, but even then I won't give up. I'll keep working at this forever."

For access to expert support and rehab services at the Healthy Living Centre in Cairns, visit **spinalhealthyliving.com.au**.

Australia's foremost assistive technology event
FOR THE INDUSTRY BY THE INDUSTRY
ADELAIDE
18-19 MARCH 2026
Adelaide Showground
SYDNEY
13-14 MAY 2026
Sydney Showground
BRISBANE
20-21 MAY 2026
Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre
(02) 8006 7357
www.expo.atsa.org.au
atsa independent living expo



GETTING TO KNOW...
Demi Hagenbach

Meet Demi Hagenbach, a 32-year-old Client Service Officer at Spinal Life Australia who calls Brisbane's north side home. After years of moving around Queensland, plus five in Sydney and a year abroad in Holland, she's happily settled in the River City with her beloved Cocker Spaniel, Swiftie. When she's not supporting clients, Demi loves spending time with her family and friends, tapping into her creative side, staying active and soaking up everything South East Queensland has to offer – from live shows and concerts to beach days and outdoor adventures.

How long have you been working at Spinal Life?
"I celebrated my four-year anniversary in September 2025."

Have you always been a Client Service Officer, or did you start off in another role?
"I was a Support Worker for my first year."

What experience or training has supported you in this role?
"I completed my Certificate III in Community Services at TAFE Queensland and then went on to gain a Diploma of Community Services in 2021. This wasn't a requirement for the role, but I believe it's important and beneficial to have formal education in the field you work in. I also had around eight years of management-level experience prior to this role, and had been doing support work with Spinal Life and another organisation beforehand."

What three words describe you best?
"Passionate, empathetic and sensitive."

What are the main responsibilities of a Client Service Officer?
"To monitor and manage the clients' support and the Personal Support Workers (PSWs) working for them."

What do you think are the main qualities somebody needs to be a good Client Service Officer?
"An open mind and good problem-solving skills. Complaining doesn't solve anything, action does. I also think it's important you have an interest in making a change, and that you work from a person-centred approach."

Can you describe an average day in your role?
"I always start by checking my emails and phone messages and following up on anything urgent. From there, my day can involve approving shifts and leave, updating rosters, and touching base with clients and PSWs to make sure everything's running smoothly. I also handle team meetings, client visits, and facilitating interviews and orientation when needed. Most tasks are then documented by note writing. I also recently started audit training, and am working with my Team Leader to continue expanding my skill set by being trained in as much as I possibly can. While I do a lot of the same jobs each day, you never know what you're walking into each morning."

What's the funniest/most embarrassing moment you've ever had while on a job?
"I think the funniest thing is how close I come to accidentally saying 'love you' at the end of each phone call with my clients and PSWs. I talk to them more than I do some of my family, so it makes sense. I mean, it hasn't happened yet, but I've come close many times!"

And the most life-affirming moment?
"I've had clients and Personal Support Workers tell me that I've given them the best support they've ever received from a Client Service Officer. That feedback genuinely keeps me going in this field and makes me believe that maybe I am making a difference."

What's the one thing you wish more people would understand about spinal cord injuries?
"To avoid assumptions about what a person can and can't do with a spinal cord injury. No two injuries are the same, and each person who has a spinal cord injury will have support that varies, and have a different outlook on their life since their injury."

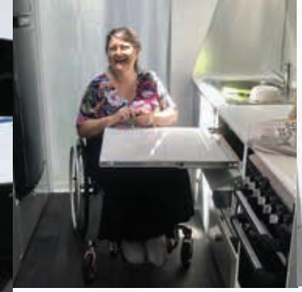
What's the best thing about your job?
"Getting to meet people from all different walks of life and hear how they overcame and worked through their injury. I've had clients tell me about their journey and I have been in complete awe – it inspires me and puts my life into perspective; I love that about this role."

And the hardest thing?
"Trying to keep everyone happy and working with people whose values don't align with your own."

What's the most important advice you would give anyone thinking of becoming a Client Service Officer?
"The house won't fall when the bones are good, so build a strong foundation; educate yourself at every chance you get and create good working relationships with your clients and Personal Support Workers early on."

What is the most important lesson your work has taught you?
"To lead with curiosity, instead of judgement."

For more information about Spinal Life's Personal Support and Home Care Services, call **1300 774 625** or visit **spinal.com.au/personalsupport**



Clockwise from far left: The game-changing entry hoist; Lyn and her customised slide-out bench; The spacious, all-in-one bathroom; A large and modern interior makes it very easy to get around; The happy travellers with their 21-foot Evolution Caravan.

Freedom on four wheels

Lyn and Ian Clelland thought caravanning was off the table – until Evolution Caravans made it possible

For years, Lyn and Ian Clelland watched friends hit the road with their caravans and figured it just wasn't an option for them.

Lyn, from Queensland's Somerset region, has been a wheelchair user for more than 40 years. Her parents once owned a van, but joining them meant Ian had to physically lift her through a narrow doorway and, once inside, she couldn't move around. "We still loved the idea of caravanning," says Lyn, "but we hadn't seen any vans that were accessible, so we just assumed it wasn't possible."

After visiting several caravan shows, they kept getting the same response. "Everyone claimed to do custom builds – but their idea of custom was choosing your bench-top colour!" Lyn laughs.

Their luck changed when they came across Evolution Caravans, a Melbourne company that has been handcrafting fully customised, accessible vans for more than a decade. For Lyn and Ian, it was the first company that really listened to them.

"I did my research and could see they had great reviews," says Lyn. "But it was still daunting doing everything over email and phone. But as soon as we spoke to Ellen she put us at ease. She was *amazing*. Nothing was too hard. She guided us through every decision and really listened to what we needed. She was a breath of fresh air."

With Ellen and Evolution's 'Builder Bob' guiding them, Lyn and Ian designed a 21-foot van that's both accessible and stylish. A wheelchair lift (similar to those in buses and maxi taxis) eliminates the need for an entry ramp, and the wider doorways and an all-in-one open bathroom make moving around easy.

"A friend said our van is like the TARDIS," laughs Lyn. "It doesn't look big on the outside, but it's huge and there's so much space – and storage – inside."

In the kitchen, low-set appliances and a custom slide-out bench mean Lyn can prep food and cook comfortably, while the bedroom features an electric adjustable bed that lets her put her swollen feet up at night. "I have one at home and it's terrific, but I didn't realise you could have one in a van – it's a real bonus," she says.

Outside, a fold-down table has been built into the side of the van, beneath an automatic awning. "We've added lighting all around the awning so it's really pretty," says Lyn. "I can't wait for us to go to a beachside spot, pop out the awning and enjoy some sunset drinks."

The couple picked up their new caravan in June 2025 and soon discovered what true freedom feels like. "On our drive home to Queensland we were near Dubbo and couldn't find an accessible toilet anywhere – so we just pulled over and used our own. It was brilliant," says Lyn.

They've only taken one other trip so far, but are planning adventures across Queensland and beyond. "Now we can just hit the road and go. No more worrying about whether a motel's 'accessible room' really is," says Lyn. "This caravan isn't just a van – it's independence. It's going to open up a whole new world for us."

Discover more about Evolution Caravans' customised, hand-built accessible caravans at **evolutioncaravans.com.au** or call Ellen on **(03) 5977 8194** or **0433 131 238**.

The latest

Information, inspiration and inclusivity

Storm season is here

Summer is here, so get ready for beach days, backyard cricket, barbecues... and an increase in severe weather across our sunburnt country. Storms, heatwaves, bushfires and cyclones are more likely between October and April, so now's a great time to make sure you're ready.

A few things you can do now:
- Sign up for weather alerts through your local Council
- Prepare or check your emergency kit (medications, torch, radio, water, non-perishable food, important documents)
- Know who you'll call if power or access is affected – including the SES on 132 500

If you are part of Spinal Life's Personal Support and Home Care Services, your Client Service Officer will reach out to review your emergency plan and confirm the support you may need if services are disrupted. This helps us keep you safe and supported – and ensures we understand what informal help you may have from friends, family or neighbours if conditions get tricky.

Visit **getready.qld.gov.au** for the latest advice and information in Queensland, and **dfes.wa.gov.au/emergencywa/prepare** in Western Australia

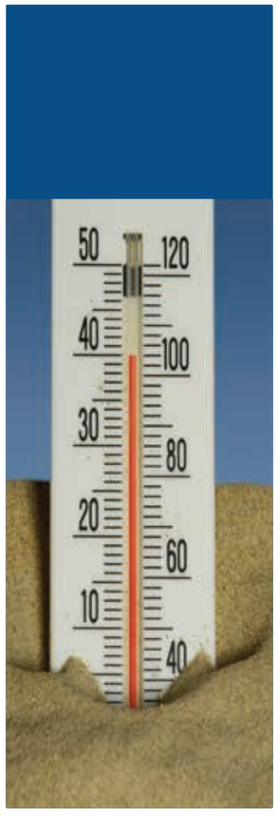
A hot tip for cooling down

If you're a Queenslander with a medical condition that's aggravated by changes in temperature, the Medical Cooling and Heating Electricity Concession Scheme (MCHECS) could cut your power costs by more than $500 per year. Here's what you need to know:

You're eligible if:
- You live in Queensland
- You have a condition that affects temperature regulation (e.g. high-level spinal cord injury, MS)
- You hold a Pensioner Concession Card, Health Care Card or DVA Gold Card
- The electricity account is in your name (or you live with the account holder and can show evidence of this)

How to apply:
1. Download the MCHECS application form and complete Sections A and B yourself, or with the help of an advocate
2. Get your GP/specialist to complete Section C, confirming your diagnosis and its impact on thermoregulation
3. Email the completed form to: concessions@smartservice.qld.gov.au or post it to: Concession Services, Smart Service Queensland, PO Box 10817, Brisbane Adelaide Street Qld 4000.
- If you don't hear back within 4–6 weeks, call 13 QGOV (13 74 68)

Download the MCHECS application form at: **www.qld.gov.au/community/cost-of-living-support/concessions/medical-concessions/medical-cooling-heating-electricity-concession-scheme**



Aussies fly high in Sydney

In August 2025, iFLY Indoor Skydiving Downunder in Penrith hosted the only Australian stop of the Handifly World Series – a circuit of international indoor para skydiving competitions dedicated to para-athletes.

The event brought together 12 Australian flyers alongside competitors from France, Germany and the Netherlands. Aussies shone on the podium, with Heath Lehr taking 1st place, Greg Pinson 2nd and Chris Astill 3rd in the Australian standings. The overall international honours went to Cyril Moré (France), followed by Niko Johann (Germany) and Sabrina Schoenmaker (Netherlands).

The weekend wasn't just about competition, it was also a chance to swap adaptive gear ideas, celebrate progress and welcome new flyers. For many, the highlight was simply being part of a community that backs one another in the air.

The event – now called the Indoor Para Skydiving World Series – will run again in 2026, from 15-16 August at iFLY Downunder Sydney.

To learn more about iFLY Indoor Skydiving go to: **ifly.com.au**. For info about the World Series 2026, go to: **ffp.asso.fr/indoor-para-skydiving-world-series**

Go with the flow

The Australian and New Zealand Spinal Cord Society (ANZSCoS) Annual Scientific Meeting was held in Brisbane from 19–21 November 2025, centred around the theme Rivers of Innovation – a nod to new ideas, shared knowledge and collaborative progress in spinal cord injury care and rehabilitation.

Clinicians, researchers, lived experience leaders and service providers came together to exchange insights and explore emerging approaches across the sector. Spinal Life was proud to be a bronze sponsor, with Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellors Tania Goossen and Belinda McLeod from our Back2Work project hosting a workshop as part of the program.

It was a valuable opportunity to connect, reflect and look ahead – and we look forward to seeing how these conversations continue to shape the work we do every day.

For more details about The Australian and New Zealand Spinal Cord Society (ANZSCoS), go to: **anzscos.org**

FIND AN EVENT IN YOUR REGION

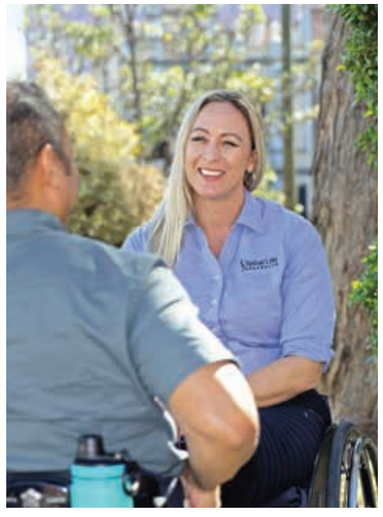
Our Peer Support Catch-Ups are held regularly across Queensland and Western Australia, and are a great opportunity to connect with others, share information and advice, and hear about Spinal Life's latest advocacy initiatives.

You can visit **spinal.com.au/events** for upcoming event dates, or use the contact details below to get in touch with our Peer Support, Post Polio or Transverse Myelitis groups.

SPINAL LIFE PEER SUPPORT GROUPS
BRIBIE ISLAND: Wayne Slattery 0449 923 887
BRISBANE: Fred Nitz 0412 190 585
BUNDABERG: Steve Richter 0413 457 284
CAIRNS: Jonas Luetke 0437 151 478
MORETON BAY: Ross Duncan 0475 077 080
PERTH: Lee Thompson or Rollo Craib 08 9449 8621
ROCKHAMPTON: Robynne Clifton 0473 576 107 or Anne Guthrie 0407 116 035
TOWNSVILLE: Biana McDonnell 0428 234 216

POST POLIO GROUPS
CAIRNS: Joy Hay 4055 5795
GOLD COAST: Lyn Glover 0448 206 856
SUNSHINE COAST: Noel Allen 0427 148 724

TRANSVERSE MYELITIS GROUP
Ross Duncan 0475 077 080



Sign up for events by joining our community at **spinal.com.au/membership** or call **1300 774 625** to find out more.

What's the buzz?

Meet the woman behind The Hunnybee Collective – a new and friendly space for real talk about sexual wellness and disability

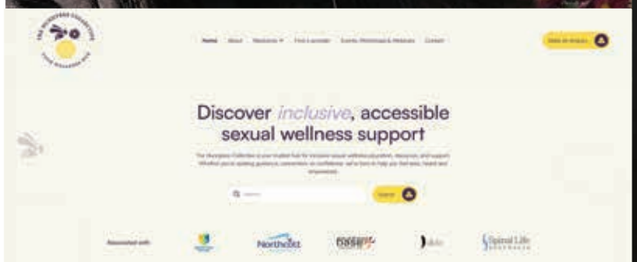
What does it mean to create a space where sexuality, identity and disability can be talked about openly, respectfully – and without the awkwardness that so often creeps in? For 30-year-old Gemma Hitchcock, that question had been quietly buzzing in the back of her mind for more than a decade. This year, she finally decided to do something about it.

Gemma first stepped into the disability sector at 18, working as a support worker with people with spinal cord injury. Those early years shaped her. "I was young and curious," she says. "I often wondered how people navigated intimacy and connection after injury – but I didn't know how to ask." As she moved through roles in administration, support coordination and business development – including time with Spinal Life – that question kept resurfacing.

> "It's where people can explore who they are – without shame."

"What I noticed," she says, "is that we talk about goals, therapy, equipment, independence – but sexual wellness and identity are still put in the 'too hard' basket." And yet, the people she worked with told her the same thing again and again: I just want to be seen as equal. I just want to be treated like a whole person.

Fast-forward to 2025, and Gemma has launched The Hunnybee Collective – an online space dedicated to sexual wellness, identity and intimacy within the disability community. The site gathers resources on topics like gender and sexuality, relationships, consent, confidence and navigating the NDIS when it comes to intimacy supports. In these early stages, it's designed mainly for providers – to help them feel more confident supporting these conversations. But the long-term plan is clear: a welcoming, accessible hub for anyone looking to explore sexual wellness in a way that feels safe and human.



This pic: CEO and founder of The Hunnybee Collective, Gemma Hitchcock; Below: The website's homepage.

"The Hunnybee Collective exists to create a space where people can explore who they are – without shame," Gemma explains. "Everyone deserves connection, pleasure, and the ability to express themselves. Disability doesn't change that. It never has."

What's striking about Gemma is not just her clarity – it's her warmth. There's no heavy advocacy language or clinical tone here. Instead, it's grounded in lived experience, curiosity and care. "I'm someone with a trauma and neurodivergent background," she says. "It's helped me relate deeply to the people I've worked with. This project comes from that place."

Already, the response has been overwhelmingly positive – and occasionally playful. "This topic can be serious and meaningful – but it can also be joyful," she laughs. "Humour and honesty can go hand in hand."

The site will grow over time – perhaps with a podcast, workshops or even services delivered directly through The Hunnybee Collective. But for now, Gemma is taking a breath. She's currently pregnant with twins. "Yes," she says, "this might be the most chaotic time to start a business. But sometimes the timing chooses you."

And maybe that's the heart of The Hunnybee Collective: Not waiting for the perfect moment. Just creating a space that's always been missing.

Explore more here: **thehunnybeecollective.com.au**.

Coaching and all equipment is provided. Our programs include:

- Adaptive Aquatics
- Boccia
- Wheelchair Basketball
- Wheelchair Cricket
- Wheelchair Fencing
- Wheelchair Fundamentals
- Para Powerlifting

BOOK YOUR SPOT TODAY!
Ph: (07) 3253 3333
Email: sport@sportingwheelies.org.au
*Excludes Adaptive Aquatics

Designed for life
Built for living

From daily drives to life's big adventures, we make mobility simple, safe & tailored to your life's journey.

- Durable and customised mobility vehicle modifications
- Hire and long-term lease of wheelchair-accessible vehicles
- Expert support for NDIS vehicle modifications

Get in touch

Book a consultation, visit our Eagle Farm demo centre, or arrange a mobile assessment.

P 1800 811 626
E enquiries@drivingmobility.com.au
W drivingmobility.com.au
A 288 Curtin Ave West, Eagle Farm QLD 4009

Driving Mobility