

SPOTLIGHT



GIG BUDDIES: A sign of true friendship

Having a buddy can mean so much. It may be someone who shares your passions and interests, or a friend to share experiences with. Gig Buddies is a socially inclusive program connecting new like-minded friends right across Sydney.

Since 2015, the program has been matching volunteers with people who have mild to moderate learning disabilities, autism or other disabilities. Buddies are matched based on common interests like music, art, sport, and their location.

Gig Buddies CEO, Carol Smal, brought the U.K initiative to the City of Sydney five years ago. At the time, local Disability Action Plans for live music events were focused on wheelchair ramps and accessibility.

“There are many people with learning disabilities or autism who may not need special access at live events or gigs,” says Carol. “Some young people with disability have never seen their favourite team play or attended a live gig, so it gives them an opportunity to meet new people and go out more.”

At its heart, Gig Buddies is about real friendship and one that benefits everyone. For people with disability, the chance to expand social networks and meet a friend with common interests means a lot. The same is true for Gig Buddies volunteers. For many, the opportunity to also make a positive and immediate impact on someone’s life is very rewarding.

“It’s empowering for people to have the chance to connect with a friend outside of their usual support networks,” says

Carol. “We have found that both people with disability and volunteers expand their social circles as part of the program. People are making new connections by joining their buddy’s existing friendship groups via social media, and meet ups also happen outside of the program.”

How it works

First, people with disability, their family or support person, and the volunteers fill out an application online. This goes into

your hobbies and interests, age, location, gender and vocation. It’s free to apply, however Gig Buddies is also funded as part of an NDIS plan under community participation or core supports.

Next, the Gig Buddies team will get in touch to arrange a Zoom call or face to face meeting to get to know more about you. Once accepted, volunteers also attend face to face and online training with Gig Buddies, along with a series of reference and security checks.

A suitable match with a potential buddy is then made based on each profile. Both applicants receive a brief profile of their potential buddy, with no personal information included at this stage.

If both buddies are happy with their potential match, there is an opportunity to meet up in person with a member of the team. The final step, once a match is made and safeguarding protocols are agreed, is to arrange the first meet up. This can be for a coffee, a visit to an art gallery or a walk in the park.

The Gig Buddies team then have regular check-ins with the pair to ensure everything is going well. There are also regular group meet ups with other pairs of buddies and activities like walking groups or online events to get involved in.

Increasing activities during COVID

During COVID, the team has seen an increase in both

activities, meet ups and applications for Gig Buddies. “It’s incredible, we thought it would be quieter because our program is based on people going out, but it’s gotten busier than ever,” says Carol. “Right now, we have more volunteers than people with disability to match with.”

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In response to COVID, the team at Gig Buddies have been keeping up. Zoom sessions and social media has helped buddies stay connected, while COVID safe meet ups are on the rise. Gig Buddies have also been hosting regular Facebook live events such as karaoke, games, music, and on special occasions like Father’s Day. In addition, more user-led projects where people with disability can speak up about their experiences, as well as a dedicated YouTube channel have also taken off.

At a time when connection is more important than ever, inclusive programs like Gig Buddies is offering hope, friendship and a sense of community for many.

To find out more or to get involved with Gig Buddies, visit gigbuddiessydney.org