



# about two men – a country boy and his mate Luke, a friendship that has changed both their lives.



**Best mates:** Luke (left, below and above) with carer Ash Werner and (far left) with his family (from left) Paul, 18, Clare, 17, mum Ellen, Luke, Joel, 22, and dad Mark. Pictures: TONY GOUGH



## LUKE AND ASH: FRIENDS FOR LIFE

### How Ash helps Luke:

- ▶ Takes him on bike rides, for swims in the billabong and they slide together on plastic bags in the dam.
- ▶ He reads Luke's body language and quickly talks him down calmly when Luke gets anxious.
- ▶ Spends quality time, getting to know him as a "mate".

### How Luke helps Ash:

- ▶ He helps with chores, such as putting Ash's lunch rubbish in the bin without being asked.
- ▶ He trusts Ash and listens when he's asked to control his breathing or count to 10 when he's getting upset.
- ▶ Ash says he is buoyed by Luke's resilience.

# OUR LUKE

They met Luke, endured his worst behaviours and agreed to take him on.

"It was something about these country people and their attitude towards others," Mark says.

"Fearlessness mixed with love, compassion and resilience. And that's still the way it works today."

Ash was the only one who would go near Luke at the beginning. Like Luke, he was looking for a fresh start.

Medical discharge from the navy had forced him to rethink his career plans.

In typical country style, he scored the job at a disability agency through his girlfriend's mother's friend, who worked there.

On the first day of the job, Ash's bosses told him about autism.

He shrugged it off. Not that he was not concerned. It just did not mean much at that stage.

THE Deniliquin agency was about young blokes on a farm in the middle of nowhere, with no phone reception, working out how to stay safe and happy.

Ash and the other unqualified farm boys spent 24-hour periods with Luke.

They saw him go through his cycles of what upset him and what he liked.

There were no locks on the door of Luke's rented home and no timetabled routine.

They rode their mountain bikes together on gravel tracks until they collapsed into the grass exhausted.

They learnt his behaviour was caused by autism, and didn't punish him.

Within weeks Luke grew friendly. He was happy.

He started to dress himself, help clean the house and he could look people in the eye.

The most seemingly trivial of incidents, in cases of

autism, can sometimes be the most telling.

Luke, for example, had never been able to wear a bandage. He would start boiling from the inside and rip it off instantly.

Once, after surgery for an ingrown toenail, his parents asked doctors to plaster his leg. It didn't last the day.

When Luke jammed his finger in a door, Ash could sense the anxiety bubbling as his finger was wrapped.

"Look at your feet, Luke. Wiggle them for me, mate."

Luke did. And the bandage was still on six weeks later.

Experts call this redirection therapy. Ash calls it common sense.

"I just treat him how I'd want to be treated," Ash says. "I just spend time with him, give him room and patience. I'm his mate. It's simple to me."

But late last year the

Deniliquin agency folded and the Modras panicked.

They bought a small farm outside Bendigo. Ash, with his partner and 12-month-old daughter, moved to Victoria five weeks ago to continue caring for Luke.

Luke, who spent his teenage years sleeping naked under a piece of vinyl, now sleeps under a rainbow doona.

Under the watch of seven support staff from Golden City Support Services, who overlap throughout the day, Luke meticulously trims his beard and delicately shaves across his chin dimple each morning.

"He smells great now," Mark says. "I've got to find out what deodorant he's wearing."

Luke's dad has high hopes for his son's future and for families fighting similar battles.

He imagines a day when

Luke is a popular neighbourhood character, helping collect firewood and rehabilitating quarter horses in the paddock next door.

He imagines a day when someone else just like Luke is cared for in the same way.

"By the end of this year our life will be back to normal and we will just come here to the farm as a family and relax."

LUKE is singing to himself in the bathroom.

Unashamedly loud, he holds each note low and unwavering, like a human trombone — relishing the way each tone bounces off the bathroom tiles.

He hits the next phrase with force, his voice unrestrained and happy.

The song is enchanting, not because of the unfamiliar melody, but because Luke only started singing again after becoming mates with Ash.

