University degree is achievable with some useful care

Jodie McClellan yesterday. Picture: David Geraghty

- Tessa Akerman
- The Australian
- 12:00AM January 31, 2017

Having moved between 10 or so care placements from the age of eight, Jodie McLellan was one of the children for whom teachers and the system had low expectations.

She attended six primary schools, two high schools, couldn’t read well until the age of 10 and overheard a teacher call her “stupid” in conversation.

“I decided to prove them wrong,” she told The Australian.

Ms McClellan is now completing a Bachelor of Nursing at Federation University’s Churchill campus in Victoria’s Gippsland and providing insight from her experience for the Raising Expectations Project, which aims to encourage more children in care to attend university.

Ms McClellan, 26, said she found various teachers helpful over the years but had to rely on self-discipline and the desire to provide motivation for her little brother.

She is in her second year of study and said she could never have afforded to go straight to university out of school.
The Care Leaver Co-ordinator at her university, Pearl Goodwin-Burns, has advised Ms McClellan about scholarships and funding for which she is eligible.

Ms Goodwin-Burns said the students she spoke to needed assistance with issues that parents might traditionally help with such as choosing subjects, accommodation, scholarships or financial options.

She said while the students varied in age and backgrounds, they all were very resourceful and resilient.

She said care leavers faced issues that come with being in care like accessing their health records, which she could help with.

“It’s handy for me to be an advocate for them,” she said.

The project manager of Raising Expectations, Joanna Humphries, from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, said less than 6 per cent of young people who have been in care go on to university.

“Not because they aren’t capable, but because we don’t give them the support and encouragement they need,” she said.

“Across Australia, we know that completing higher and university education opens doors and opportunities for a successful and fulfilling life and we support and encourage our children to do this. Yet we don’t do the same for young people who have been in care.”

Raising Expectations’ partners Federation University and La Trobe University are supporting about 50 young people who have been in care.

The project is funded by the Sidney Myer Fund and will run for three years.