My Story – Student Voice: Nicola-Jean Berry

Advocating for opportunity beyond out-of-home care

When I was a child, attending university was not something I viewed as achievable. In my home it was mentioned in the same breath as living on a houseboat, or owning a farm populated only by cats. A lovely dream, for someone else who could do that sort of thing. Now at 24, I am a first-year student at La Trobe University in Melbourne. I am studying social work, in the hope that I can be the support for someone that I did not have — the person that says, “You do have options, and I can help you get there”.

I grew up on the North West Coast of Tasmania, and from the ages of three to 10 I spent time in and out of the foster care system. By 11, I was a ward of the state. My mother was a single parent; her only source of income was government benefits, and she suffered severe mental illness without treatment. This meant that our lives were unstable at the best of times, and at the worst it included homelessness and poverty.

Due to this instability, I missed about a third of my primary school education. Luckily, I loved to read, and took it upon myself to follow my interests and learn on my own, spending hours at the local library, and I was able to progress to high school without being held back.

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I was able to attend a private high school, and I must emphasise the incredible good fortune that this was. I have older siblings who advocated for me to my case worker, and I also pushed to be able to go to this school, as we all knew that education was vital to achieving a better life than the one I had come from.

Very few children in my situation are granted this opportunity, and I was one of only two children in the entire school that was in state care. This may have been why there was such a prejudice around my living situation. Many of my friends were told by their parents not to associate with me, and teachers were inclined to allow my work to slide. I was told repeatedly that I was “so brave and doing so well” for achieving what would be the minimum for most. This kind of stigma and dismissal is something that needs to be addressed, as it is not often spoken about when discussing the out-of-home care system.
When I was around 16, I finally had a stable foster home with a lovely woman who I still consider family. I had teachers who noticed my aptitude for English and drama and pushed me to enter competitions in which I did well. I began volunteering with the Create Foundation who assist children in out-of-home care. I started to think that I could make something of my life.

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In the year I turned 18, I was a National Youth Delegate for the Create Foundation and was part of a conference with other young people from all around the country voicing what we believed needed to be changed to help the next generation of foster children. I also moved to Melbourne on my own and began a chef apprenticeship.

As it turns out, hospitality was not for me and I left that behind. For the next few years I worked to support myself; I travelled, and found a fantastically supportive group of friends who helped me realise my goals.

University has presented its own challenges. As a mature age student I am somewhat out of practice with formal education and the organisation it requires. Balancing study, work, a social life, and time for self-care can be difficult. However, one of the great things about it is that my background is not such a prominent factor anymore. While where I come from is a part of who I am, it does not have to define my experience. This is so important for anyone from a difficult background to know, that education can be a way to have the equal standing among peers that you may have never had before.

Steps are being taken to ensure that care leavers are able to access education. La Trobe is currently part of a program called Raising Expectations, which encourages care leavers to seek higher education, and the Create Foundation provides wonderful advocacy and support services. These are great initiatives, but I believe more can be done. An early intervention in schools for at-risk children would develop good study habits early on.

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Consistent case workers and foster families would provide a stable adult role that is often so lacking. Raising the care leaving age to 21 would make an immense difference as many care leavers are purely focused on supporting themselves, and have no time for educational pursuits. I decided to study social work because it is a way that I can use my experiences to
help others, to strive for positive change in both government policy and public attitudes towards children in out-of-home care. Every child deserves an equal chance, and someone to encourage them to take that chance.

At La Trobe University I am already being able to do this in small ways. I was asked to give an interview for ABC radio about the adversity that I had faced because of my background in regard to higher education, and I am able write this piece for the NCSEHE. Additionally, La Trobe provides a bursary grant for students who have spent time in out-of-home care. I am so grateful for these opportunities, and I am excited to see how much further my education can take me.

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