My Story — Student Voice: Joseph Farren

Joseph Farren is building upon his personal experiences in the child protection system to improve the lives of other young people.

After transitioning from TAFE to La Trobe University, Joseph is now studying a Bachelor of Human Services and Masters of Social Work, in the hopes of becoming a qualified youth/social worker.

I left home and went into care at the age of 13. At first, I was placed with extended family members, but this broke down and I was forced to live in residential care. Nine years on, I am now studying a Bachelor of Human Services and Masters of Social Work at La Trobe University, and hope to become a qualified youth/social worker.

Looking back, I can see that my time in out-of-home care had a significant impact on my schooling. Some of the places I lived were out of town, so I had to organise transport, including buses or lifts. This was stressful and overwhelming and affected the amount of time I was at school and able to study. I was also rebellious and often caused trouble by riling up teachers — my way of getting attention because of my living situation. So, I didn’t learn as much at school as I should have.

I’ve had people throughout my time in care supporting me and making a difference in my life in many ways. The case managers I had during my time in care, and the effort and commitment they made to ensure I had all the essentials I needed, were important. In saying this, I often felt as though I was on my own in learning how to deal with situations that were happening, especially once I had transitioned out of care and didn’t have support or anyone to lean on — by that stage, I was considered an ‘adult’. In retrospect, I think that child protection workers could do more during the initial stages, when a young person is first taken into care to make sure they understand what’s happening, and at every step of the way to ensure that they are making the best decisions that are going to help them for when they leave care, once they turn 18.

The case workers, case managers, as well as other support workers (disability support workers, occupational therapists, etc.) helped me in many ways, but one of the things they...
did was encourage me to go on to further study. I had many people tell me I had the potential to go on and study youth work or social work, and that working within the system I could potentially change someone’s life. I have a lot of compassion and empathy for others and a drive to improve the lives of young people. I thought, ‘this is something that I’m really passionate about, it’s my life story, so why not pursue it?’

When I turned 18, I was officially considered an adult … I didn’t have the basic skills to live fully independently at this time, but I had no choice in the matter.

During Year 12, I completed a Certificate II in Community Services, then went on to Certificate III, Certificate IV and a Diploma of Community Services at TAFE. The more I studied and the more I learnt, the more invested I became, so I applied to La Trobe University and was offered a place in the second year of a Bachelor of Human Services and Master of Social Work.

When I turned 18, I was officially considered an adult. I transitioned into independent accommodation and all support from my case worker ceased immediately. I didn’t have the basic skills to live fully independently at this time, but I had no choice in the matter. I had to suck it up and deal with it.

I’m now living on campus at La Trobe and the manager of the residential accommodation services helps me a lot with ensuring I pay my rent on time and also assists me when I’m struggling to make the payments.

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During my time at La Trobe University, I have received a $500 Care Leaver Bursary which has really helped me with purchasing some of the equipment I need to study. I have access to a support worker on campus who helps me to organise my work and study. Other university services I’ve accessed include the counselling service; I know that I can go and speak to the counsellor and leave there with a clear mind and several strategies for managing my self-doubt, stress and issues with confrontation. There are also peer support learning advisers who I can go and see outside of class who can give me guidance with my studies and completing assessments. There is lots of support available at university but it is up to you to access it.
I think that having TAFE and other pathways to university is really important for students like me because they provide a bridge between school and uni. At TAFE I learnt to become more independent in my studies and gained confidence in my own abilities. At school you are quite supported, and someone will follow up with you if you are falling behind or not doing the work. This happens less at TAFE, whereas at uni you need to be very self-motivated. If you don’t show up to a class, that’s on you. If you don’t do the readings, that’s on you.

My advice for others who come from backgrounds similar to my own is, don’t be so hard on yourself, know you’re not alone, and don’t give up!

The main quality I think I have gained from my time in the child protection system is resilience. Lots of resilience. I’m also learning to deal with conflict, which has been a challenge for me in the past. I don’t like being told what to do, which sometimes happens in life and at TAFE and at uni. I’ve been lucky in that I have had many case workers and support workers model ways of managing conflict. I’ve learnt that it’s often best to take a step back and realise that what is happening has very little to do with me, that it’s not my issue but their issue, and that I don’t need to take their issues on board.

My advice for others who come from backgrounds similar to my own is, don’t be so hard on yourself, know you’re not alone, and don’t give up! If there’s something you really want to do and you’re passionate and you’re invested then think positively because you can achieve anything you want to. And if there is an issue and you are struggling or have concerns then raise them early. It might seem hard to talk to people about your problems, but you need to find people you can trust, who can help you talk through your concerns. This might be a counsellor or a friend, a teacher or a housemate. Talking to people will help you clear your head and get a fresh perspective so that you’re able to go and do what needs to be done.

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