



## **Good Business Forum scholarship recipient speech 2019**

I don't believe in the term 'out of home care', because it was in care that I found my home.

I don't remember much about my early life. My mother, Meredith, was 18 when she had me, and my brother, Jay, was only ten months behind. Meredith wasn't well equipped for caring for my brother and I, and my father was absent. My brother and I lived with my maternal grandparents, but they too were unable to care for us, and would put cigarettes out on my brother.

Eventually, we were sent to live back with Meredith. She had many boyfriends, and many of them were abusive, targeting my autistic brother. My mother had another child, a little girl called Deirdre, who died at 30 days old. One of my earliest memories is visiting her in intensive care. Her father broke my leg when I was 3, and was incarcerated for drug charges. It was in prison that he ended his own life.

My biological mother has had 11 children, with multiple men, many of whom were abusive, and would beat my brother. I can remember being questioned by police about the abuse, however, I was unable to explain the difference between the truth and a lie, and none of my anecdotal evidence was used.

A month before my 4<sup>th</sup> birthday is when my life changed. My brother and I entered the care of my foster parents. I was a fragile child, and I felt unsafe in the world. I had witnessed and experienced more than I would have ever liked to. I struggled to trust anybody to look after me, the world was a scary and unwelcoming place.

My foster parents have been my largest support in life, and have helped me to move past my past. I began to feel loved and appreciated. I remember when I approached my foster father and asked if I could call him dad. He was more than happy to have me as his son, and that is the moment that I truly began to have a father and a family.

My foster parents have amazing character and attitude. They have helped me to accept my past, to make my own judgements about my biological parents, and to accept that the past has happened and cannot be changed. I was encouraged to visit my biological mother and make my own judgements of her. My foster parents have allowed me to be who I want to be. I was given the freedom to choose what I wanted my life to be about. I was taught that I am in charge, that I choose my actions and my future.

As a young kid I would always sit down alone and colour in. It was my favourite thing to do and I loved blurring out the chaos of life and just focusing on my work. As I grew older this transposed into study and I spent most of my time (and still do) studying.

My teacher at Williamstown High School, Ms Goller, recognised my commitment to my education and when I was in Year 10 she nominated me for a Western Chances scholarship. My application and

I was awarded funds for textbooks and an annual Myki, which was invaluable as I was travelling from Little River to Williamstown daily and now travel from Little River to Parkville for university.

I had never received a scholarship before, and was very excited about Western Chances. I was, and still am, grateful to be able to help my family by removing some financial stress. I am proud of my work ethic and my achievements, and having these acknowledged by people who didn't even know me has been motivating and inspiring. I knew that as long as I continue to work hard, Western Chances would continue to support me. This has been so empowering, and continuously renews my determination to achieve my goals.

What I didn't understand at the time was that Western Chances would lead to other great opportunities.

In 2016, when I was in year 11, I participated in the residential Young Leaders Program at Trinity College with students from all over the world. This was a life changing experience, and helped me to cement my ambition to study Biomedicine at Melbourne University. This year I returned to Trinity as a Young Leaders Program mentor. One of my students is also a Western Chances student, and was unanimously voted Valedictorian for his ambition, and his willingness to learn new things and meet new people.

Western Chances has supported me in my application for a Dafydd Lewis Trust Scholarship, which supports my university studies. I am now a Dafydd Lewis scholar and receive \$10,000 per annum for the three years of my undergraduate degree.

Western Chances invited me to apply for a non-residential scholarship to Ormond College. At first, in my naivety, I rejected this offer. I didn't understand the challenges of life at university, and, after a single semester at Melbourne Uni reached out to Western Chances to see if the offer still stood. Thankfully, it did. I am now a member of the college, and have found that college life has enhanced my personal, social and educational experiences of Melbourne University. I have benefited a lot from my time at Ormond College, and am now in my third semester as a college student, making the most of study spaces, group tutorials, gym and social services and of course, food. I've since learnt to always take an opportunity that Western Chances offers to me.

Being awarded a Western Chances scholarship has allowed me to save money towards other educational experiences. In 2016 I travelled alone to India and spent my entire school holidays shadowing doctors. I was able to experience the medical system in developing areas of the country, and watch a number of surgeries, including a laparoscopic gall bladder removal called a cholecystectomy. This was an invaluable experience in teaching me the reality of medical practice and helped me to reconfirm that my future is in the medical field.

I am often told that the success my brother and I have seen in care pays a strong homage to the power of the foster care system, and whilst I do believe that this is true, I have never identified my life as a 'success story'. I recognise that I have experienced considerable hardship, but, because of the care and support of my foster parents and organisations like Western Chances I have been able to grow up feeling like a normal kid. I know that because of this care and support, I have been liberated from the seemingly inescapable emotional stresses of my early life.

Western Chances cannot support young people like me without the support of people like you. It is an incredible organisation which gives young people so much more than money. Every young Western Chances scholar I have ever met has been given empowerment, opportunity, motivation

and meaning by you all. It has opened doors to opportunities I could have never dreamed of – opportunities that have been crucially important in my life so far.

I am determined to pay my respect to your support, and the support I have received from Western Chances. I want to spend my life giving back to others. When I complete my Bachelor of Biomedicine next year I hope to study Medicine at Melbourne University and ultimately train in surgery. I want to use my skills to help the people and communities who need it most. I also want to support Western Chances in the future, whether that is financially or through mentoring young recipients. I envision that I will ultimately choose to do both.

Right now I am dedicated to extending the support of young people in care from 18 to 21. I am heavily involved with the Home Stretch Campaign, which aims to make the extension of foster care a reality. In 2018 I made a speech to state politicians and people of influence to advocate for this change. The State Government has since begun piloting the extension, and is supporting 50 young Victorians in care until the age of 21. It's a start, but we can do more. The Home Stretch is calling for the change to be made nationally. I actively advocate for the Home Stretch, and have been interviewed for television, radio and the Australian Newspaper and podcast. I also recently appeared live on SkyNews and ABC News Breakfast to discuss the issue. The Home Stretch is aiming to collect 21,000 signatures in support of an extension to care. I hope you will support the campaign, and pledge your support on the Home Stretch website.

Whenever I am complimented on anything, my Mum and Dad always joke that I got it from them, and whilst I know that they are joking, I personally do believe that I did get everything from them. They taught me how to treat other people properly, how to live my life with respect and love, and even though I had a natural affinity for learning, I would never have accomplished anything without their endless love, understanding, and support. They gave me so much more than just a home. Foster care gave me the ability to do anything that I have ever wanted to do, it has allowed me to live happily and forget about my past. It is a part of me, but only in the best of ways.

My parents helped me become the kind of person worthy of receiving a Western Chances Scholarship. This was a powerful moment of affirmation in my life. I am, and always will be, extremely grateful for everything I have received as a part of the Western Chances community. I would never have achieved as much as I have without them. I will always honour this support and I would like to thank you all again for your support. My success, and that of all other Western Chances scholars, is possible, in large part, because of you all, who donate so generously to young people like me. Your continued support has helped young people like myself to believe that it is possible to reach our life goals. I want it to be clear that the support Western Chances gives me is so much more than simply financial, and will continue long after the end of my education.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.