

## Western Chances Scholarship Award Ceremony 2019 – recipient speech by Lien To

I cannot imagine my life without Western Chances. I know people often say these things and you probably think I'm exaggerating but I am not.

When my teacher Ms Voidis told me about Western Chances when I was in Year 10, I saw the tagline 'Chance of a Lifetime' and I thought: 'As if!' Don't get me wrong, I was keen to receive a scholarship, it's an honour and the financial support was much appreciated. But the 'Chance of a lifetime'? How could that be true? I was soon to find out.

Western Chances has opened up the most incredible opportunities to me, things I didn't even know existed, things I would never have been able to do even if I had known about them. In addition to my annual scholarships this was and continues to be a great gift to me and my family.

My parents, my sister and I are from Vietnam. My Dad is a refugee who came to Australia in 1997 by boat and the rest of us arrived in 2000. For many years my parents have worked in low paid jobs. They worked incredibly long hours and when I was younger I did not see them very much; my older sister looked after me most of the time. They all sacrificed a lot so that I could have everything I needed to excel in school.

I remember my Dad driving me to school each morning and how tired he was. When I received my first scholarship I was awarded an annual MYKI which meant I could free him from this task. At last I was able to do something for him!

My parents left Vietnam because they did not feel safe and they wanted to make sure my sister and I had more opportunities than we would have if we stayed there. Opportunities were limited, especially for girls.

Given that having access to opportunities was so important to my parents a very strange thing happened when I was in Year 11. Ms Voidis told me that Western Chances had invited me to participate in the SPARK engineering camp at the University of Melbourne. I would live on campus and explore all things engineering, which was something 'maths and science me', was very interested in.

But my parents said no. No way. I cried, I begged, I cried some more and would not come out of my bedroom but my Dad was especially adamant I could not go. I had pretty much given up hope when my sister and aunt and uncle convinced my parents that this was a fantastic opportunity so they relented and allowed me to attend.

This was a turning point in my life. It was my first time away from my parents and I felt apprehensive, even a little afraid. But as soon as I arrived at SPARK all fear left me; I was with smart, kind, passionate and like-minded people and I loved every minute I was there.

If I had not gone to SPARK my life would be very different: it SPARKED something in me!

It opened my eyes to a world of possibility and I became determined to explore and participate in as many opportunities as I could. I saw these opportunities as pieces in my life's puzzle, pieces that would come together to shape the picture of my life.

So many of these opportunities have been because of Western Chances. While still at school I attended the Young Leaders Program at Trinity College, was joint valedictorian and I also had access to fantastic and free VCE revision seminars.

I am now in my second year of a Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Melbourne and have benefited from many other opportunities because I am part of the Western Chances community:

- I am a non-resident of Ormond College and have access to all it has to offer including tutorials and eating in the Harry Potter Dining Hall!
- I have returned to the Young Leaders Program and Spark Engineering as a mentor where I work with young people from around the world
- I was part of the Doxa Future Insights Program where I learned so much about how to build a career. They also facilitated a paid internship with the Level Crossing Removal Project which I completed over the summer

So maybe now you can understand why I was wrong when I doubted the claim that becoming a Western Chances recipient was the 'Chance of a lifetime'.

There's something else I want to say: sometimes we don't achieve our goals, sometimes we don't perform to the standard we expect of ourselves. I was always good at school but last year, my first at university, was hard for me and in some subjects I did not do well. This was an unexpected outcome and I did not really know how to deal with it. Academic work was always something I was good at. If I failed at that then what? I questioned if I deserved to be at university, if I deserved to have my scholarship, if I deserved all the opportunities I was receiving?

But then, with the help of some friends I looked at it another way: in my life there would always be unexpected and unwanted outcomes; I will always encounter puzzle pieces which don't seem to fit the picture of my life. I just have to work with them.

So many people have believed in me and I have a duty to acknowledge that, to keep the belief in myself and to get back up when I fall. I have decided to take an extra year to finish my degree. This was not an easy decision, it was an unexpected piece of the puzzle but it fits and it will be another fragment of my life's picture. I will continue to work with passion and with pride and I know that I will give back and make a difference in the community.

I want to thank everyone who has supported me and believed in me; I especially want to thank Western Chances because without them, without their support and belief, my life would be very different.

I want to tell the newest members of our wonderful community that Western Chances believes in you. For as long as you remain committed to your education they will support you with scholarships and every single one of you, at some point or many points in your Western Chances journey will have access to life changing opportunities. It's up to you to jump at them: jump at them and fly.