

MODELS OF ACHIEVEMENT

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ANNETTE SHUN WAH: Hi, I'm Annette Shun Wah, welcome to Models of Achievement. In this series we explore the successes and aspirations of extraordinary Australians who have discovered their inspirational paths through university study. These are personal stories from people of very diverse backgrounds, graduates and current students, revealing how education has transformed their lives. After experiencing some very dark days in her childhood, single mum Nicole is turning her life around by discovering a passion and talent for ancient history.

NICOLE: My name is Nicole, this is my story. I grew up in Queensland. I had a pretty topsy-turvy childhood. Things kind of went a bit upside down and my father left when I was only 22 months and we lived in, I suppose what would be best understood as probably hippy communes.

And then Mum moved us out to Cooroy into a farmhouse out there that was empty and vacant at the time and so we were squatting in it and there was no electricity, no running water, no toilet. Yeah, it was kind of fun.

I do remember times when the police would come and do raids and, you know, I remember quite a few times waking up to women screaming and police in my room dragging me out of bed and Mum coming out and giving me a few toys because I wasn't even allowed to take my toys out because the police wanted to search all my rooms looking for anything that, you know, may have been illegal substance.

I can't say that it gave me good feelings towards authority figures and so I think that that was kind of unfortunate because I think it set me on a path to wanting to sort of buck authority. My very first school as at Cooroy Public School and I

remember going to school on my first day wearing a little hippy skirt and turning up to school and being very different to everybody else and immediately feeling that, that I was - there was me and then there was everybody else.

And then Mum moved from Cooroy to Eumundi. Grew up there, I didn't really make any friends, was the outsider, was different, was new, was ostracised.

Moved to Sydney, I went to Avalon Primary School for three months and that was disastrous. Then we were living in Leichhardt at that stage and I went to Leichhardt Primary School for about 6 to 9 months and moved back to Noosa and then went to high school at Noosa District State High. Started to buck the authority and I was running away from home. I got found by the authorities in Shepparton, which is in Victoria, just over the border of NSW, which meant that I was under the jurisdiction of the Victorian Government rather than NSW Government and because they assessed my situation they figured that I was an uncontrollable child and they made me a ward of the State of the Victoria and put me in a detention centre, Winlaton Girls' Home.

And I spent 9 months there, which was an extraordinary period of time. I did everything I possibly could and took every single opportunity I could to get outside of the facility. I was given the opportunity to go to a farm.

I formed a really quick relationship with the people who owned and ran it and they gave me a lot of opportunities to go, I think maybe because I was a country girl, and they gave me opportunities that a lot of the other girls weren't getting and that was to work with the horses up there and to actually get a lot more hands on. And those people contacted the facility and asked if I could go out there and if they could foster me for a while, which was great.

But it gave me something and that was an ability to think that not everything was going to be crap, that there were nice people out there, that there were people

who thought that I was worthy. They ended up fostering me out to a family in Melbourne at which point I went "You beauty, I'm out of here" and took off. I was back to NSW.

By the time I'd got to 16 I'd been in some pretty bad places and I'd done some pretty stupid things and to be very, very, very honest with you, and I'm not kidding, I'm surprised I'm still alive. So many dangerous, dangerous situations. The Cross is not a place for a child to be, certainly not a young teenage girl. If your imagination has thought it then you're probably right.

When you have a near-death experience based on a drug overdose and you wake up and then you come to and come through it all at maybe 15 or 16 it's the bell ring that you go "Whoa, okay, no." I always had a very definite line in concrete between my real life, my real life mum, my family, all of this, that was my real life to my other life and so when I stepped over each time I left one behind and neither of them ever crossed over and it was because I did that that when I finally decided I did not want to be in that environment or doing these things anymore that I was quite able to make a clean break from it and just say - and just step back over this side and not step back over there anymore and that was all there was to it. It was just never going to back to that.

And yeah, and I just thought you know what, I want to do something more than this. So I decided to go to TAFE and I - because I didn't want to go back to high school and so I inquired at the Ultimo TAFE about doing my school certificate. Finished it and then went back the next year and was continuing on and I was thinking I either wanted to do journalism or I wanted to do ancient history so I really wasn't sure which I wanted to do. I was very much leaning towards journalism. I wanted to be a '60 Minutes' reporter, I wanted to get down there in the trenches with a camera crew - one cameraman and sound guy and get in the dirt and go and talk to people, real people, you know. That combination of communication and adventure you got me, you know. So that was then.

Being 17, you know, and being a bit out there and stuff, I had a boyfriend and I wasn't very cautious about what I was doing and I ended up getting pregnant. Yeah, and I left TAFE. I also left my daughter's father. She was born on the 31st of December 1989 and I turned 18 six weeks later.

I put everything on hold. I was a single - that was it, I've been - I was a single mum and that was my job, that was what I chose to do and there was no time to go and do anything else at that point except for look after her. And the years went by and I met my son's father who was a sound engineer. So I learned how to be a lighting technician and a roadie.

Then fell pregnant with my son and decided that when he was about 9 months old that I actually did want more from my life and I went to Seaforth TAFE and did the university preparation certificate. At that stage one of the history teachers at Seaforth had - I'd written a paper and he actually approached me and said, "This is some really, really good work, have you, you know, considered going to this particular university because they've got a really fantastic history department." So I was like oh, okay, you know, it's interesting that this man has said, you know, look, you should really maybe think so it really set my head to thinking see how we go, I probably need to defer for three or four years.

I was having a pretty horrible relationship and I just found out that my partner at the time had been cheating on me and so I went to the doctor to go and get a full screen test. So I went back to the doctor to get the test results and the doctor told me that I had hepatitis C. That was the lowest point. My doctor had told me there is only a prognosis of death and that the extent of my illness and the amount of virus that I'm carrying that I had at that stage 10 to 15 years.

And so, you know, I just - I thought well I've got to do - what makes me happy, what do I want to do, you know, who do I want to be? I want to do something. I

need to re-educate myself or further educate myself.

I looked at a couple of universities but the one that I really wanted to go to had a program that allowed mature age students an entry, an alternate pathway into university which is based on the experience that you've had as a mature age person and I found out within, you know, a month of sending the application off that they'd accepted me and I was just so excited. Never been so excited in my life about anything, I don't think. And it was just thrilling, it was just this whole new thing was going to happen.

So the first year and second year I did the whole thing just on Austudy. And so after all of that's said and done my son and I were kind of - I was trying to feed us and keep us, you know, keep us with a roof over our head with only about \$220 a week. I found out about these great opportunities that our arts department offered an equity scholarship plus they were offering an equity internship and I thought I'm going to go for both of these things and if I get one fantastic. So I applied for both. I got both.

So then I thought wow, maybe I should try applying for another one and so I applied for a 2012 scholarship and got that one and I went this is fantastic. So I thought I heard about another one and I thought well, I wonder if I could get that one because if I could get that one that could complete - that could mean I could just really seriously sit back, all the bills would be paid for the entire year, all of my books would be, you know, everything I would need without having to stress, seriously go crazy and possibly drop out, you know, and jeopardise what I've been doing has been completely removed.

I'm doing all 300 level units this semester - this year and I got did four units 300 level units last and I got four distinctions. Fingers crossed I'm going to get - hopefully get some good results this semester as well which is basically my last semester of my undergraduate career. I go on to do my master of research next

year which these scholarships have also enabled.

Look, if there's a message I can give anybody and that is nothing's ever too hard. I feel a lot more positive about my time on the planet now. I feel it's just a really good experience. It's my happy place. I feel good being there. I meet fantastic and amazing people who are either my cohort or are these incredible people who have all this knowledge to impart to me.

My name is Nicole. This is my story. I went to 9 schools in 11 years. I spent nine months in Winlaton Girls' Detention Centre. I have three chronic illnesses one of them being chronic hepatitis. I've received university scholarships without which I would not have been able to continue to do what I'm doing now. University's given me myself back.

ANNETTE SHUN WAH: Thanks to the assistance of several scholarships, Nicole will graduate with a Bachelor of Arts with a major in art history.

END OF TRANSCRIPT