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**Denise’s story**

Engaged, keeping house and caring for both her partner and grandmother at 21 years of age appears to be the life of somebody other than the mature age student being interviewed. After realising that domestic life wasn’t for her, Denise left the relationship and entered the work force full-time. It wasn’t until the inception of ‘Project 40’ that further education came on to the horizon for Denise. With a 40th birthday approaching, Denise began to wonder about her future life direction and arrived at the decision that a university degree would be her exit strategy from her current employment role. With the ambition of a better job in her 40’s, further education appeared to be the right vehicle to provide Denise with more financial security, but also the means to demonstrate to herself that she had the intellectual capacity to study at university.

A redundancy package initially facilitated the transition from full-time employment to full-time study, however the financial adjustment has been a big challenge. To meet her financial demands Denise now works in temporary full-time roles, regularly working on 4 or 5 week full-time assignments followed by periods of time where she doesn’t work. During the periods that she works full-time, Denise reports that she wakes early and studies between 4am and 7 am before heading off to work. Unfortunately the system doesn’t always work for Denise, recalling a particular time when the juggling of both work and study was particularly difficult:

**I started a new job a few weeks before the last exam period and I was only supposed to be there for 4 weeks full-time, but 7 weeks in I was still working full-time and trying to do exams, and they wouldn’t give me any time off for exams, only for the day. I just sat in the exam room and I kind of cried because I thought I don’t know anything, I didn’t put in my 6 or 7 hours a day, 7 days a week. I didn’t fail but it affected my GPA.**

With an ambition to continue onto honours and post graduate studies, Denise’s GPA is a constant pressure for her, with the need to push for perfection always in the back of her mind. Denise’s studious and organised nature has resulted in an alternate plan for future careers should she be unsuccessful in achieving her first preference of honours. These alternate plans demonstrate for Denise the benefits of university and the range of options that it provides.

The financial transition is not the only challenge that Denise has had to address based on her decision to go to university, describing a negative response received from her family particularly in relation to her choice of studying psychology. This disjunction between Denise and her family has continued to widen with Denise explaining how she feels that she has grown away from her family:

**Like having conversations that don’t really stimulate me anymore but are on the family level, I function up here sometimes and I don’t function well with the lower level stuff like making conversation. I’m spending 6 hours with my head in a text book and then I’ve got to go and talk about family members that I haven’t seen for ages about babies and children, they’re not conversations I want. I feel like I’ve moved on so much but they’re back here, they’re still stuck in their old ways, they’re still first, second and third generation Centrelink recipients.**

Although Denise feels that she is growing away from her family, the same is not true for her long term friendships, Denise credits her girlfriends for providing invaluable support and an avenue to talk about her studies. These external friendships remain key to Denise as she has so far been disappointed with how difficult it has been to break into the ‘cliques’ and make friends at university.

**It’s kind of sad in a way, but I’m kind of grateful for not having a distraction. I’m really focused on the degree basically, I’m here for me. I thought about the mature age student society type of thing but with working I don’t have time to meet up with people, I’m purely just either at work or at university, like there’s really no in-between, I guess I’ve alienated myself, I don’t really have time. In lectures or tutorials I will talk to the person next to me, but we’re not besties or going shopping the next day.**

Despite the lack of social networks at university, Denise feels a sense of belonging and talks about her strong affiliation with the university environment including the beauty of the architecture.

**Saturday, Sundays I’m in the library. I know I’m addicted and I just love the library, it’s just gorgeous. The smell of the library takes me back to primary school, hanging out in the library in primary school and high school.**

Alongside the support of her external friends, Denise also credits the assistance of a tutor in providing support and guidance as being key to her understanding the importance of help seeking behaviours.

**I was struggling with an essay and because I’d asked for help he was able to help me. He said because I’ve asked for help he was able to help me, he said “ I couldn’t approach you and say do you want some help”. That kind of inspired me to seek help more, including not to just accept a failure or a low grade. I didn’t know that I could do that, I didn’t know that was an option for me.**

In reviewing her university experiences to date and the transformation that has occurred within herself, Denise recognises that she is now a more disciplined and confident person. Most importantly however, Denise has achieved one of primary objectives of ‘Project 40’ having come to the realisation that she is ‘smart’ and more than capable of achieving her ambition of attaining a university qualification.