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**Jen’s story**

It is hard to imagine that the confident and articulate 29 year woman being interviewed could have experienced any self-doubt in her abilities to succeed at university, but Jen reports that when she first started university, that was very much the case.

**I was nervous, incredibly nervous and I had no faith that I’d do well. There was an incredible absence of information, so I felt like I was in a vacuum but I pretty much muddled through. I went to an introductory workshop for mature aged students but it had nothing to do with being a mature aged student. I didn’t see any connection at all…. I was a bright beaver, quite happy but nervous, I had no idea what to expect and I had no idea how to do the right thing…. I had no tools to write an essay … But I flourished and I’ve enjoyed it, and I’ve now had a couple of years to practice it and it’s pretty easy to write essays now.**

Despite Jen’s initial uncertainty she has proven to herself that she can succeed at university in the same way that she has succeeded in other aspects of her life. Jen reports that she had been a good student during high school, but various stresses impacted her final year. Consequently Jen chose not continue onto university, but instead focused on climbing the corporate ladder working in an industry primarily occupied by university educated colleagues. She recognised that she had gone as far as she could career wise without university qualifications, and a timely suggestion by her boss prompted Jen to consider the option of university. An option that Jen had felt wasn’t available to her earlier on her life, but one that would now foster her love of learning and assist with career advancement. As a result Jen chose to complete a Bachelor Arts (Advanced) degree, a qualification that she anticipates will meet both of those requirements.

**A Bachelor of Arts (Advanced) is going to look good on my resume because it’s got advanced next to Arts. In fact I was given the opportunity to move to Canberra or Sydney for a job. I said no because I want to stick with the advanced degree which was based on a very rational choice, but going to university is also an emotional choice because I love to learn. I’m a big reader and from primary school I remember writing a lot so there has always been this engagement with text.**

As a high school student Jen’s mother recognised her daughters’ abilities and was very supportive of her continuing on to university. Jen reports that her mother’s narrative had changed slightly when Jen told her about her decision to return to study, with Jen’s mother stating that she thought that Jen’s decision was fantastic but she also expressed concern regarding her ability to balance both work and study. Jen’s mother’s concern was well founded, and balance is an aspect that Jen works hard to maintain and not something that always manages to achieve.

**Technically I have made financial sacrifices, I’ve gone from a full-time well paying job to part-time role that is still relatively well paid. I can survive and I’m really lucky because I’m with a partner and we share finances, so that’s not a pressure. My one cost that I regret is my fitness, I used to, before university, go to a gym about three to five times a week, I had personal training, and I ate really well. The first two years of university was really trying to understand what to do and being so frantic to understand meant I was either working or I was studying. That didn’t leave a lot for going to the gym, for cooking healthy meals, for going to the shops. I went to the deli a lot to get my lunches so I could then rush back and do what I need to do, so I’ve gone from a size ten to a size fourteen, so it really has been a cost to my fitness. On the flip side I now have the tools to write. I’ve sacrificed fitness but I’ve gained other tools that I’m quite happy to use.**

In exploring how Jen manages to maintain balance in her life, she describes being strict in keeping different aspects of her life separate and being really focused when you needed. Jen’s compartmentalisation of the different aspects of her life may also contribute to her reluctance to identify herself as a student.

**I often forget to tell people that I’m a university student and I have noticed it’s usually my partner who pops in and says something. He usually brags about my grades which I actually don’t like, but he’s proud of me and that makes a huge difference in feeling encouraged to go to university. I usually just say what my work role is as I think of University students as 18 to 23 year olds, I’m a mature aged student so there’s a separate classification, so I tend to think more about my work role when I’m speaking to people.**

Despite Jen not having an affiliation with a student identity, she confirms that she has a strong sense of belonging at university, feeling that it is the right path for her. A sense of belonging that is strengthened through the support she receives from her partner and extended family, as well as key academic staff.

**My partner is incredibly supportive, he went to university so I have someone to talk to about these things. It’s made such a difference to just talk and have someone that I can chat with about this stuff. My partner’s family are university educated and it’s good, they’ve really shown an interest and encouragement but it’s also helpful to be able to branch out to these networks I never had before.**

Jen’s love of learning has led her to avail herself to all of the learning opportunities that university has offered. Consequently Jen recognises significant personal growth including the provision of language that she’d not previously possessed, and an ability to view the world in a different way. Skills and abilities that Jen hopes will enable her to continue her journey of learning through the completion of honours and a PhD, combined with an ambition of career progression.