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Joanne puts worries behind her

At first Joanne Skeels from Rayleigh was nervous about attending university, worried that she would have problems fitting in and socialising, because she is the only deaf student in her group. Joanne is now in the second year of a BA Degree in Behavioural Studies at Anglia Polytechnic University and uses a communicator and has a note taker for her lectures. She says the staff are kind enough to ask if she has any problems and feels she can easily approach them if she has any, while her group are very understanding and always include her in discussions.

After being bullied at school, Joanne's confidence slipped, but since starting her university course, her confidence has returned and she has made a greater number of hearing friends than she would have imagined. She is also more comfortable with the hearing world.

While at SEEVIC College Joanne studied A-levels in Psychology, Sociology, Drama and Theatre Studies and General Studies as well as Key Skills then with her parent's encouragement she started her degree. Among her plans for the future she is considering becoming a youth counsellor.

'Life's too short for regrets,' says Joanne. 'It is true that university is the best time of your life. If people are pulling you down, just ignore them and carry on because you are as capable as other people of achieving a degree, or anything you want to do. Getting a degree for me would be success in its own right and I will not have let the bullies win.'

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Rafiq shows determination

When Rafiq Swash came to England from Afghanistan alone just over two years ago, he was 16, and could speak only broken English. Now he is one of the youngest and most successful on his HND (Higher National Diploma) course in Computing at Havering College.

He has recently been given a rare opportunity to show his talents after a job agency based in Romford offered one lucky student the chance to redesign their website, and he was chosen for the task.

Rafiq has had a life long passion for computers, which he was unable to fulfil properly whilst in Afghanistan because of the lack of technology - there were no computers in the schools or colleges he attended. Once in England Rafiq gained a BTEC National in IT Practitioners General and at Havering he was so determined to succeed he also completed a part-time Advanced Visual Basic course alongside his full-time HND course. He has now passed a total of ten assessments with distinctions.

'It wasn't until I came to Havering College I really began to develop my skills,' said Rafiq. 'It has been tough, especially when I did the part time course alongside the full time one. I want to carry on developing my knowledge of computers at university. I feel really proud of what I have achieved so far.'

'I came to England alone which was a bit hard, but since being here I've started to make my dreams come true and gained my independence as well as made some good friends.'

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John makes up for poor start

John Degiorgio started at Havering College with no qualifications. After six years, several courses and a lot of determination, he now boasts a string of qualifications and is about to sit his HND (Higher National Diploma - a Level 4 course) in computing, hoping to become a systems analyst.

After failing to gain any qualifications at school John, who is now 23, was only able to enrol on to an Entry Level Key Skills course, but with hard work has turned his situation around to become one of the college's greatest success stories.

He said: 'At the start of my studies it was hard but the more I learnt the easier it became. I was determined to do well. I carried on studying in one place because I had become so familiar with everyone and it's nice to see friendly faces that you recognise.'

After gaining his first qualification John successfully completed Key Skills Level 1, followed by a foundation GNVQ in Information Communication Technology, the GNVQ Intermediate qualification and then, finally passed his Gateway to Higher Education exams.

'I didn't get the best out of my school education as I faced a lot of disruptions, but I think I have made up for that now. My plan now is to get a job in computing but I definitely wouldn't rule out coming back to the college to top up my degree,' he said.

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Farming background for high flying Libbie

Coming from a Braintree farming background there was no history of university in the family of Libbie Ripper from Colchester. Last year Libbie, who is 23, graduated with an upper second class degree and has now started a successful career in Public Relations and Communications.

After finishing her GCSEs, Libbie studied for a GNVQ in Business at Braintree College, gaining a distinction in a subject she particularly enjoyed and excelled at, and the tutors encouraged her to take it a step further and apply to university.

But Libbie was still undecided about university, not sure that she wanted to go, so instead deferred her application. She then spent the next twelve months travelling around Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA and Singapore.

When she returned, Libbie was still unsettled and keeping her options open decided to give university a go. Since then she has not looked back.

'Upon my return from travelling I was unsettled and decided to go to Oxford Brookes University to study Business and Tourism,' said Libbie. 'Three years and a lot of hard work later I graduated with a 2:1 and did my family very proud. I would recommend higher education because it not only offers an education for your career, it offers an education in life.'

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Eva is first in her family

Now about to enter her final year of a History Degree at Nottingham University, Eva Robertson, from Basildon, will also be jetting off to Australia in February to study at the University of New South Wales. Until Eva made her decision to begin a Degree no one in her family had ever gone on to higher education and she believes that it is worth putting in a little extra effort to go to university.

After taking her AS-levels in Law, Critical Thinking, English Literature, History and Psychology at Palmers College, Eva went on to study A-levels in Law, English Literature, History and Psychology before starting university in 2002.

'The college played a part,' she said. 'I had good teachers who encouraged you to go as far as you can. You can get a lot more out of university life - it's an all-round experience. You learn a lot about yourself and other people.'

Her family are very proud, and Eva is happy with the independence she has gained by taking the decision to go on to higher education. In the future there will be opportunities for Eva to study in the U.S.A and Canada and she is thinking of doing a conversion course later and entering law as a career.

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Faye chooses work-based learning

As a single parent Faye Miller took the decision to return to education because, with two young children, she was not in a position to find a full-time job. Having children made her more determined to do well.

So when she was 27, Faye decided to start a two-year work-based learning Foundation Degree in Business and Management. Last year she graduated from the two year Degree, then after completing an additional year, Faye has just graduated with a BA with Honours Degree in Business and Management at the Colchester Institute. When she was 19 Faye completed an NVQ level two with a company in Suffolk, and was 20 when she had her first child.

Faye said: 'At home sometimes you feel like you're climbing the walls, but don't feel able to do anything about it. My employment history was pretty staggered. At first I thought: 'I can't do a degree', but there is no harm in trying. Learning gives you so much. It doesn't matter what situation you are in and now I have opportunities that I didn't even realise were there.'

During the first year of her Foundation Degree Faye worked with the banking company HSBC, and with Essex County Council, in the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership, in the second. Now she is considering, among many things, getting her Masters Degree.

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College supports Stuart

When Stuart Wilson left school he had just two GCSE passes. With dyslexia, dyspraxia and other disabilities that affected his learning he felt he had not been given the support he needed, so went to Chelmsford College to re-sit his exams gaining, five passes and putting a foot on the path to university.

After sitting his GCSEs, Stuart completed the AVCE (Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education) in Media Studies and then last year, when he was 19, went off to study Television and Radio Production at the University of Sunderland.

When he graduates Stuart plans to take a postgraduate course in Journalism and eventually work in radio.

'You have to stay positive and aim to be the best you possibly can,' he said. 'You have to give it a go or you will never achieve anything. I got a lot more support at college (than at school). In my first year my dyslexia was fully diagnosed, and I had people checking on my studies and I got extra help. During the last two years I was also given the space I needed.'

University has made a dramatic change in Stuart's life. He now prefers living in Sunderland and says that he has grown up a lot.

'It's given me more independence. When I was four the top hospitals in London said I would never talk or walk, or do things on my own. Through sheer determination I have achieved and will continue to achieve.'

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Confidence has grown for Carrie

Carrie-Anne from Tendring has just finished her first year of a Psychology Degree with the Open University. When she was 12 she was diagnosed with dyslexia, and left school with just one GCSE pass. Through her determination 23-year-old Carrie-Anne, a single mum, has turned her situation around, regained her confidence and in the future hopes to become an art therapist, focusing on education.

Carrie-Anne became involved with community support Sure Start after the birth of her daughter four years ago and through them has taken around ten courses, including Reflexology and Confident Children, and eventually gaining an NVQ Level two certificate in Pre-School Practice through Sure Start and the Tendring Adult Community College.

'I thought I'd never do a Degree,' said Carrie-Ann. 'Through Sure Start I built up my confidence and realised I can study and don't fail. Sure Start also provided a crèche so I could study with ease - they made it possible. I would say to anyone do a degree, find some way. Use the facilities available as much as possible. There's very few people out there who cannot learn.'

Carrie-Anne said she now has a lot of support for her dyslexia and believes it is important for anyone suffering a learning difficulty to make it known to the right people, because if they don't know they can't help.