

How can you change the world through education?

I can't believe I'm sharing my story with you, but I'm grateful for the opportunity. I know how much of a difference people can make to students from disadvantaged backgrounds because I was one of them.

My name is Cherie. Last year, I graduated from Swinburne with a Bachelor of Social Science (Psychology). Completing my degree was a long and, at times, challenging journey, but there was one point where everything changed for the better. I was struggling, and I asked for help. Swinburne answered, and that act of generosity enabled me to continue my studies instead of dropping out which I greatly feared at the time.

My childhood was spent in the care of others outside my immediate and extended family. I'm what is known as a "Care Leaver", and every person who has been in this position has their own story to tell.

Not by choice and instead due to circumstances largely beyond our control, the vast majority of Care Leavers don't finish secondary school let alone go to university. In my case, I left state care at the age of 15. I subsequently became homeless due to aftercare and youth housing being non-existent for Wards of the State leaving care at the time.

I knew the statistics were against me, but I wanted to be educated. I held this dream close to my heart and started knocking on doors asking for help. Some years later, thanks to the belief and support of others, I found my way to Swinburne. At the conclusion of the second year of my degree I fell ill. For the same reasons I'd been taken into care in the first place, sadly, no one in my family was able to help. I looked at scholarship options but none reflected my circumstances or story.

At first, I felt defeated and forgotten about. Then, I decided that the time had come for the adversity faced by Care Leavers in education to be recognised. I took it upon myself to educate Swinburne about the needs of students like myself.

I contacted everyone I could think of within the university, arguing the case for the creation of a scholarship for Care Leavers. Swinburne's response was a personal lifeline. I knew at the time that Swinburne's Care Leaver Scholarship was the first of its kind offered by any Australian university. What I didn't expect was to be the scholarship's first ever recipient! This privilege touched me deeply.

In 2018, I attended the Swinburne Student Achievement Awards. Again, I was humbled. With much help along the way, my journey had taken me from homeless teenager to a university Achievement Award recipient. I was asked to make a speech at the ceremony. Of course, I used this opportunity to let people know that there are thousands of Care Leavers out there, and that almost none of them will receive a higher education, unless we do something about it.

I dared to dream of a better life than the one I was born into, and refused to stop fighting until I achieved it. Education was my ticket out of poverty and thankfully, Swinburne provided that at a time of great need.

Thank you for hearing my story. Let's work together to help other Swinburne students, from all kinds of backgrounds, to share theirs with the world.

Cherie

Bachelor of Social Science (Psychology)