



gateway

Making it through school and getting a job seem like the usual milestones in most people's lives. So much so that it is easy to forget that these achievements have never been a possibility for some young people.

TERRY got involved with drugs when he was sixteen years old and shortly after was told to leave his family home. He was in and out of refuges every few weeks between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Terry received two youth detention periods of six months and two months. Such experiences leave little capacity to learn, to gain confidence or to imagine the possibilities that work might offer. In all this turmoil Terry had little chance to even dream of gaining a skill that would give him a chance to work.

Not long after his release from youth detention, Terry was arrested and convicted of robbing a taxi driver. This time he received an adult sentence of eight months. By now his mental health had deteriorated and he spent a significant period of time in the acute assessment unit in Melbourne Assessment Prison where he was diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia.

A stable job gives self-confidence, a chance to be independent and to

make choices. It offers a chance to form relationships with others who have that experience too. It creates the possibility of being relied upon, of giving support to others and of being supported in turn.

Where do you begin when there is nowhere to start learning about managing life? What do you do when there is nowhere to find support to step into a learning environment where you won't be judged or rejected if you can't keep up?

In 2002, Jesuit Social Services received a substantial grant over five years from the Colonial Foundation to develop a range of programs which would give people like Terry a chance.

Terry was referred to Gateway by the Brosnan Centre after his release from prison. He participated in a group program which helped him to address his drug related issues and to plan for a healthier lifestyle. He gained enough confidence to begin working at the Gateway kitchen making Abbotsford Biscuits. He was working with pastry chef Loretta Sartori whose patience and skill gave him a chance to learn as he worked. Terry also had the chance to develop trust and he began

to talk. Loretta sees that the learning goes beyond acquiring cooking skills.

Conversations fly across the workbench as we share the repetition of the task at hand. Often under the guise of humour home truths surface, with traumas and past experiences being shared with an honesty reflecting the trust that has developed between the team. What can be witty and fun one moment belies the depth of sadness that has touched a young person's life.

After a time at the Kitchen, Terry applied for a traineeship through Gateway and William Angliss. He completed four months of the traineeship and then obtained employment at a restaurant.

But there are many who have come to Gateway who have found it more difficult. Matthew had many psychiatric admissions interspersed with heavy drug use. He has also been convicted a number of times for drug related offending. He left school after year eight and struggled to read or write. Matthew attended a program which helped him look at ways of

managing his drug related problems and to try and develop healthier ways of living. These were all big challenges for him, even within the supported environment of Gateway. Within a couple of months, Matthew reoffended and this time he received a custodial sentence. But there had been significant gains. He had developed important connections and stays in touch with the Kitchen staff. He talks of his dream to learn to read and write with confidence and to learn a skill and find work. He is not sure what that might be yet. It is hard to have a sense of what you want to make of your life when life has been so unforgiving.

The staff at Gateway were well aware that more could be done to help young people like Matthew. The programs which helped Terry and Matthew are no longer funded but Jesuit Social Services is looking at new ways of offering a chance to learn which are safe and supported and which allow for the disrupted and sometimes chaotic episodes that some young people experience. The biggest task will be to convince decision makers that it will be worthwhile. Matthew and Terry would say it most certainly is.

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