

# Melinda's Story\*

Hi there, my name is Melinda - my family and friends call me Mel. I am 33 years old and a single mother to my gorgeous little daughter Cassie and fantastic son Trent. Cassie is 3 and in pre-school and Trent is 8 (going on 84) and is in third class. We live in an old house in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales, not far from Newcastle. I don't have any family close by but I do have some great friends, and the children's father, my ex, lives close by with his new partner.

Right now I am embarked on one of the most thrilling and scary things I've ever done in my life. This year I went into the Open Foundation Program at the University of Newcastle to try to realise my dream of being a high school teacher. The website says that the 'Open Foundation is a tertiary preparation program' - it's for adults who don't have a university entrance qualification and who've been out of school for a while (or in my case for a very long while) and who want to get into uni. And very important for me, it's free, so if I fail I'm not racking up a big debt - life's hard enough!

I am the first in my family to ever even think about going to uni and I must say I've surprised myself this year with how I've gone - but more of that later. Actually I had heard about the Open Foundation last year and it's amazing how many people I meet now - and some that I've known for ages - who have been through the Open Foundation - why hadn't I heard about it before? Because I tell if I had I would have been knocking on that door years ago.

Anyway when the Breaking the Barriers people, Sarah, Cathy and Jo, asked me if I would write my story for the Breaking the Barriers First in Family website, I said I'd be more than happy to because it's been such a positive time in my life..

## ***Catalysts for change***

Thinking about the events that brought me to uni, I think it started a long time ago really. Growing up in my working class family, I wasn't even expected to get an ATAR, just

## **My Story of Getting Into University**



**Melinda  
36 years old  
Single Parent  
Two children  
and  
University Student 2015**

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leave school and get a good job which I was lucky enough to do. I worked in a car sales office and the people there were very lovely and some of them are still my friends. My brother went to TAFE and became a plumber and my sister is a hairdresser - so neither of them were interested in uni, not even now. So the idea of coming to uni did not come from my family. But I had a really fabulous art teacher at high school and she encouraged me to think about uni and teaching but I was hell bent on leaving school as soon as could and get a job and see some of the world if I could - which I was lucky enough to do and I lived overseas for a while. So that teacher

stayed in my head and I thought in the back of mind that I'd really like to be like her. When my marriage broke up, I thought I have to do something to secure my children's and my future and my very long dream of being a high school art teacher came back to me. I certainly didn't want to work in sales for the rest of my life. That these two things were the catalyst for my big change and for enrolling in the Open Foundation.

### ***"I'll see how it goes"***

I've had many friends who have been to university but I didn't really know what to expect to be honest. And I deliberately tried not to have too many expectations because I didn't want to become anxious about "Will I be able to do it?" because there was always that niggling doubt, you know, "Maybe I'm too dumb, maybe I'm too old, maybe..." but I just put them aside to be honest and just walked in and I find that once you have stepped over the threshold of fear really, there's really not a whole lot to be worried about. Mind you, I knew there would have to be changes but again I didn't sort of imagine too much until I realised that 10-15 hours a week per subject was expected on top of the actual class time. That's when I realised it was going to have quite an impact, especially at weekends. Anyway I think I was unprepared for what that would be like - you can't expect or prepare for everything, can you? You don't know what you don't know so I just thought "I'll see how it goes".

### ***It surprised me actually***

As you can probably imagine there wasn't a lot of talk about university in my home growing up but some of my ex husband's people had been to uni - his sister is a midwife - and the general view in my circle was the uni was good if you were super brainy. My dad, a really intelligent man, thinks that academics can be airy fairy and not really as grounded as they could be - but having said that he's as proud as punch that I am at uni this year, and so is my mum and the rest of the family. They live in Wollongong so we don't see them often, but mum and dad are helping me out financially this year and that's such a big relief and I can concentrate on my studies. Even my ex is supportive and he is actually thinking

about doing the Open Foundation because he can see how much I am enjoying it and getting such a lot out of it. I should say that friends have been supportive too - but in various degrees. It surprised me actually that some of the people who I felt would be the most supportive have just been not as supportive but then I've found people who were amazing, people who have stepped up and they were like: "Oh wow, really great. Do you need any help? Do you want this? Do you want that? Can I help you?" So the first not so supportive group have noticed that, because of choices that I've made, I've moved further away and they've noticed. And they're right - of course I don't see half the people I normally see because I'm so busy!

As far impacts on my little family well it's the same thing - the kids know that mum's a lot busier than I used to be and I have to be very organised or everything just falls in a heap. One thing I have noticed though with both Cassie and Trent is that when I am studying at the kitchen table, they will tend to get their books and pens and we will all do 'our homework' together. Cassie is precious making little noises as I struggle with art history assignment or something. I've brought both of the kids to the university and Trent is very impressed with the library - all those books and all those computers. I've shown them where my classrooms are and where I have a cup of coffee with my new friends. Trent started at a new school this year and he says that we are both the same - we are both meeting new people and doing new things - isn't that gorgeous? He has also been a lot more responsible with Cassie, helping out with her at home - although she is not always cooperative I can tell you, but he keeps his temper by and large. I wish I could say the same. Thankfully my out of uni friends sometimes take the kids when I need a special block of time and my ex has the children one day a week, and Cassie is in pre-school one other day so they are the days I go class.

### ***Persist – you'll get the hang of it***

So the Open Foundation have been a godsend for me - and an eye-opener. At first it felt like I'd moved to another country in the classroom - the lecturers seemed to speak another language almost. Still as I persisted with it, I

began to get the hang of it. A big thing in this has been the friends I have made in my classes - what a fantastic bunch of people - and we have formed a study group and we help one another out, meet for coffee and hang out in the library. One day when Cassie was down with a fever and I couldn't get to class, two of these wonderful people rang me to see if I was okay and took notes for me in lectures. How's that for support?

My strong advice is to go to everything that you can that's put on to help you at uni - go to bridging courses in essay writing especially

(that's what I did and I am still congratulating myself for it); go to orientation sessions; get help when you need it. I usually find it hard to ask for help in certain situations but now when it comes to uni, for some reason, I'm like "Bring it". I need all the help I can get! The result has been that I have got results beyond my wildest dreams. Who knew I was able to get distinctions and high distinctions at uni! It's like for over fifteen years I've had this silent ambition to be a teacher tucked away in a secret place and now I am making it a reality so that all my thoughts of 'What if ... what if...' have become "I can!"