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Ayrshire College, Ayr Campus

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Hi, I'm Sandy. I'm originally from Largs, but now I live in Prestwick with my wife and our wee boy.

I grew up pretty poor. My dad lost his job as a mechanical fitter during the 1980s and he never really worked again after that. My parents split up when I was around 13 and I stayed with my mum, but life was a bit chaotic for me when I was young. Largs isn't a poor area, but we didn't have a lot of money and there was a sort of stigma around that. Being such an affluent town, there didn't seem to be much government spending on programmes to help with jobs or to give disadvantaged kids a boost. Other areas around us maybe got regeneration programmes and stuff like that, but we never got any of it. I hated school, and I grew up thinking that the people around me just weren't very nice.

I never got any Highers, but I did enrol at college in Cardonald when I was around 17 or 18 to study electronic service engineering. I guess I thought that, because my father had done that sort of work, it would be the right path for me. I had always found learning new things pretty easy and I coped okay with the subject, but I had no ability to manage academic work, no understanding of how to structure my writing or focus properly on essay questions. I eventually did get my HND, progressed to university and completed first year, but then I developed a serious illness, and it took me about 18 months to recover from it. Because of the illness—and, to be honest, also because of the way I was living my life at the time—I never managed to finish the degree. That was almost twenty years ago.

After leaving university, I worked in every kind of crap job you can think of: factory worker, cleaning cars, doing the bins for the Council, labouring on building sites, driving taxis. Loads of stuff. I spent years earning just enough of a wage to go out and party. That was all I did, which I can see now was just a product of my upbringing. That was also a factor in the longstanding problems I had with anxiety and depression. One way get through those uncomfortable feelings is to go out and get smashed, so that's what I did.

Looking back on it, I can see that whilst I had enough intelligence for academic work, I lacked the emotional ability to cope with everything else—I lacked the toolkit that "normal" people seem to get from their families, the skills to go out and handle life. I never had any of that when I was younger. I also had the sense that I'd already had my one chance, and I'd blown it, which stopped me looking any further than my next pay packet. That's why I am so grateful to SWAP; it's the second chance that I didn't think I would ever get.

Eventually, I got sick of the way I was living my life and sick of my job. I was a full-time bin man and I decided instead to go and work in social care. That was a bit of a war zone, though, with such low wages it was hard to get people to turn up for shifts, and I barely made ends meet, so I continued to think about alternatives. My sister and my sister-in-law are both nurses, and they kept urging me to go for nursing, too, but I kept thinking of reasons why it wouldn't work. I thought I was too old. I thought I wouldn't get funding. I was full of all kinds of excuses.

But my wife wouldn't take any of that. She's an I.T. professional and she used her research skills to gather information about my options. In the process, she found out about SWAP and told me about it. At first, I responded with the usual defeatist negativity and wouldn't act on it, but she kept encouraging me and eventually I decided to apply anyway and let the chips fall where they may. I mean, what's the worst that could happen, right?

I had a big fear, to be honest. I worried that I wouldn't qualify for the programme because I had studied before, or I wouldn't get funding. But after looking into it further, I found out that the rules had changed since I was last in education, and I was eligible to try again, I guess because it had been so long ago, and it was in such a different field altogether. So, I got my place at college and I was ready to go!

But there were new fears to conquer. I remember going in to college on the first day and I was so nervous I had spots in my vision! Fortunately for me, somewhere along the way I had encountered something called SMART (Self-Management and Recovery Training), which helped me to turn my life around. It's a science-based method for dealing with addiction, which was something I had a lot of in my family history. I started volunteering and doing peer-group facilitation for the families and friends of people with addiction issues. Leading those sessions led me to learn about new concepts and approaches, like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), disputing irrational beliefs, and things like that. It really helped me, and so when I got to college and felt that anxiety rising, I was able to draw on that experience, feel the fear, and carry on anyway.

I really enjoyed my time at college. It's a really intense course, especially in the first six months. Having not done any kind of studying or much of anything for nearly two decades, to then go in every single day and do that kind of work is daunting. Within weeks, you've got to start thinking about writing essays and giving presentations and stuff. But it was a good course and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I did well on my assessments and finished my programme with top grades (AAA), which gave me a big boost, and I feel like I got a good knowledge base to help me go on to my degree studies. I want to give a wee shout-out to Pam MacGibbon at Ayrshire College, because I don't think I would have gotten through it without her support. She was observant and caring, a real "people person" who always had a listening ear and good guidance to give.

I'm doing well at university so far. The first year was kind of tough; it's a bit of a culture shock. College work is highly structured, and the lecturers become really involved with you in a real mentor-type relationship, whereas at university there's less of that kind of support. I also had some health issues that troubled me in first year, but things are better now. I am getting good grades and I'm on track to finish the degree. My mental state is totally different now, I'm feeling better, and I'm starting to enjoy the course a lot more.

Any words of advice to others?

If you want it, you will really need to work for it. That can mean being a bit selfish at times, putting your foot down, and saying, "This is my time", when friends and family expect you to be elsewhere.

And to anyone reading this who is still young enough to be out partying: you'll need to accept large sacrifices in your social life. You've got to put your studies first if you want to succeed at it.

