



They Did It !

Local Success Stories in Higher Education

connexions



worcestershire
countycouncil

Aimhigher...

June 2011

Introduction

Prepare to be inspired....!

In this booklet you will read about 10 young people from Worcestershire who either refused to give up even when things got really tough or who decided not to follow the crowd, but to do things their own way instead.

Each person followed their dream and eventually achieved their goal of getting to University.

If you've ever doubted yourself or thought "maybe Uni isn't for me after all", then read on. You can't help but be amazed at the lengths some young people have gone to - people just like you maybe?

So read on and Aim High! After all, they did, what's stopping YOU?



Lisa Richards
Support Guidance & Skills Service (Connexions)
June 2011

Index

Victoria BSc Veterinary Medicine & Surgery	Page 1-2
Laurence Masters in Theoretical Physics	Page 3-4
Claire Foundation Degree in Early Years	Page 5-6
Simon Paramedic Practitioner Degree	Page 7-8
Jamaal BA Hons International Business Management	Page 9-10
Cornel Degree in Theology & Philosophy	Page 11-12
Stuart Joint Hons Degree In Drama & Screen Writing	Page 13-14
Amy Achieved 2:1 BA Hons Primary Teacher Education	Page 15-16
Abi BSc Hons Degree Animal Sciences	Page 17-18
Bryony Degree Business Management & Financial Accountancy	Page 19-20



Victoria's Story

Currently studying for a BSc Veterinary Medicine and Surgery at the Royal Veterinary College at Edinburgh University

Ill health –takes a year out

AS Levels at Worcester Sixth Form College

AS Levels at School

GCSEs

Having a father in the army meant that Victoria had to move around with her family. Changing schools each time affected how well Victoria did in her GCSEs. Although her school allowed her to progress into 6th form to study for A/S levels, she quickly realised that the subjects she was doing were not the right ones for her and she left school.

Victoria's ambition was to get into Veterinary College so, after a year out, she went to college in Worcester, to do maths, chemistry and biology at GCSE alongside an A/S level in law. Although she achieved this Victoria then faced extra challenges:

“I had to take a year out due to ill health and worked part time even though I was ill. At this time I was also caring for a chronically ill family member and helping to look after my 3 siblings.”

Although she continued to be a family carer and suffered periods of ill health, Victoria determinedly went back to college to study the A/S and A levels she needed for veterinary school – maths, chemistry, biology and physics.

Getting into Veterinary College is competitive – to say the least – yet despite her difficulties Victoria won a place and is now studying for a BSc in Veterinary Medicine and Surgery at the Royal Veterinary College at Edinburgh University!

So, how did she do it?.....

Victoria had to put in a lot of sheer hard work and effort, as well as determination, to get where she is. She says:

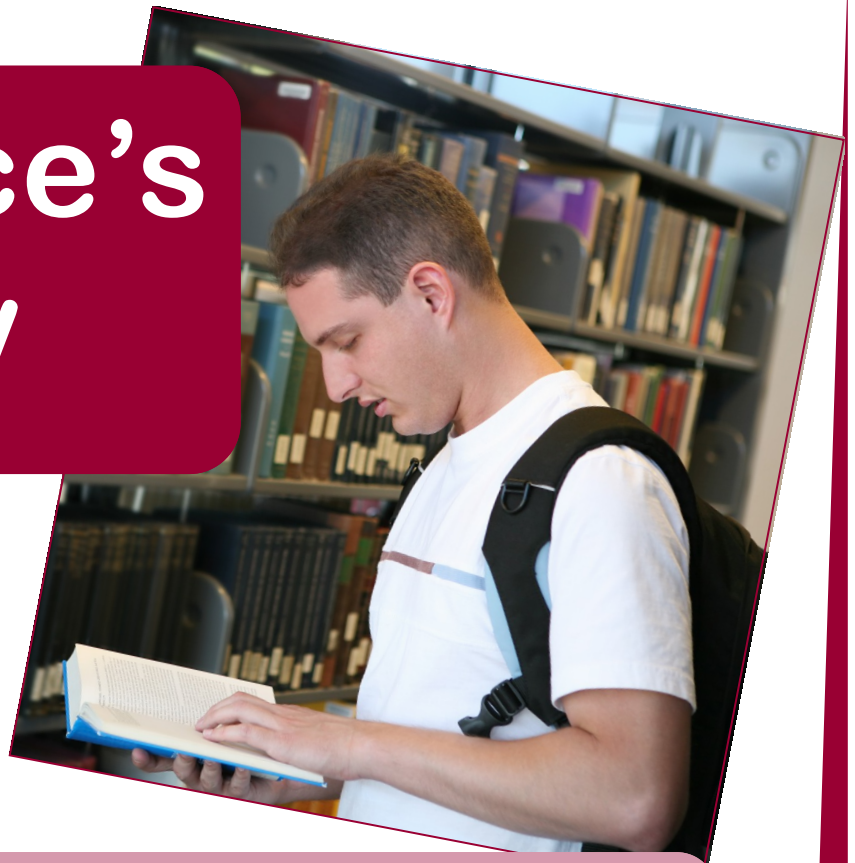
“It doesn't matter what's happened in the past with your education; all that counts is what you do with it in the present. Nothing is out of reach if you're willing to put the work in. The hard work does pay off!!!”

Victoria also had support from her colleges' student support network to help explain her special circumstances and make sure that her higher education application form did her justice. It clearly worked and Victoria got offers. She says:

“Make use of every available resource—it will help. The day I got my A level results was a very emotional day for me and the staff in student services at College! My results meant I was finally on my way to veterinary school!”

Victoria is now planning to work with horses and donkeys in the welfare sector, she may move on to a Masters Degree in Equine Science, after completing her first degree, to improve her skills and prospects.

Laurence's Story



**Currently studying 3rd Year Masters Degree
in Theoretical Physics at
University of Birmingham**

**A levels at
School Sixth Form**

**GCSE support at
home due to ill
health**

**Starts GCSEs at
local high school**

Laurence developed a serious mental health problem at the age of 15 - right at the start of his GCSE courses at his local high school. His illness and treatment meant that he was unable to attend school for much of years 10 and 11.

He had support from the Worcestershire County Council Medical Education Team – who supported him at home with his GCSE studies and later his A levels. Although he had to drop a number of his optional GCSE subjects he went on to achieve his GCSEs at mainly A* and A grades.

Laurence was able to attend his schools' sixth form part-time as he started to gradually recover. Maths, further maths and physics at A levels were a challenge, but with determination and the right support in place, Laurence went on to achieve mainly As at A level.

His home tutor and Connexions Personal Adviser helped him with decisions along the way, like which A levels to study - or which degree to go on to take. His psychiatrist also helped by supporting his application for a Disabled Students Allowance. This is an allowance that can be applied for by students who, due to a mental or physical disability, need to pay for essential extras to live independently and study at university.

Laurence is now on the third year of a Masters Degree in Theoretical Physics at the University of Birmingham – doing well and really enjoying university life. His health has improved and he no longer needs any extra support – but it is there if he needs it!

So, how did he do it?.....

Laurence feels that the help and support he had during the difficult years of his illness made a huge difference to him. Being helped by the Worcestershire NHS Early Intervention in Psychosis team and having a home tutor meant he could go on and achieve exam success and rebuild his confidence. This also helped his recovery from his illness.

“Looking back there were times when I really didn’t think I would be able to carry on. I really valued all the help and support I had to help keep me going when my future looked so bleak.

To start with I wasn’t keen on accepting any help at all but I’d say to anyone in my position to take any help and support you are offered - it can make a big difference to your chances of success.”

Laurence isn’t sure about what he is going to go on to do as a career in the future – he has thought about mathematical modelling, becoming a computer consultant or teaching.

“I’ve learnt that it is important to always aim high and not let any problems stop you in your tracks. I’m ambitious and keen to do well on my degree and in the future.”



Claire's Story

**Currently employed as a Nursery Nurse
& Studying for a
Foundation Degree in Early Years at the
University of Worcester
one day a week**

**FE College: retake GCSE Maths &
English, GNVQ Health & Social Care,
BTEC Diploma in Early Years**

GCSEs at school

Changing schools and subjects in the middle of your GCSEs isn't the best way to do well in your exams but for Claire - who had stopped attending school because of bullying - there was no choice. She had to work hard at her new school to tackle new subjects and catch up:

“Given the circumstances I was pleased to have achieved some GCSE’s at C or above, and was particularly proud of my B in RE as I had been predicted a fail.”

Keen to get the right qualifications to work as a nursery nurse – including improving her grades in English and maths from a D to a C - she moved on to college. After achieving her GCSEs at C and a GNVQ in Health and Social Care, she then progressed on to the BTEC National in Early Years.

Her determination and choices paid off:

“I finished my course on Friday and started work as a qualified nursery nurse the following Monday.”

After working as a nursery nurse for more than two years she was offered the opportunity to study one day a week for a Foundation Degree in Early Years alongside her job.

Having learnt early on that if you were determined and worked hard you can overcome difficulties, Claire is doing well on her Foundation Degree. Even a change of job and area from Worcester to Northampton hasn't stopped her in her tracks – she now travels for three hours one day a week to keep up with her degree at Worcester University!

So, how did she do it?.....

Claire feels that it is really important not to let the bullies beat you:

“If you are being bullied at school try your best to focus on your work and in the long run you can succeed and rise above the bullies. Don’t be afraid to speak to someone you trust so that you can get some support.”

Getting the job she wanted to do and earning money to support herself was also important to Claire and she feels that the way she did it is a good alternative to taking a student loan:

“If money is an issue for you, look into part-time Foundation Degrees as there might be funding available for employers to pay some of your fees. As you will be working at the same time as studying, you may also be able to save money rather than get into debt.

Although working 40 hours a week and one day a week at university sounds a lot, I still find plenty of time to enjoy myself, although mainly at weekends!”

Claire isn't planning to stop there either:

“Once I have completed my Foundation Degree I’m planning on doing an extra term to gain Professional Status. I am then considering topping up my qualification to a full degree and progressing on to a Primary Teaching Post Graduate Certificate!”



Simon's Story

Currently studying at the University of Plymouth for a Paramedic Practitioner Degree and has already achieved DipHe in Paramedic Practice & BTEC Level 3 in Emergency Ambulance Driving

A Levels at College in Worcester

Studying for GCSEs at Home

Studying for GCSEs, A levels and taking exams, may be difficult for most of us, but for Simon, who became physically disabled and needed to use a wheelchair as a result of an illness at the age of 12, they were a real challenge.

His illness stopped him from attending his local high school and he had to carry on studying at home with support from his family and a teaching assistant. Hospitalised for a year at 15, he took his GCSE exams at the hospital school - with special arrangements in place to have rest breaks and to use a laptop, as he was unable to write.

Despite his health difficulties, Simon achieved his GCSEs at mainly A* and A grades. After leaving hospital he was able to recover some mobility and went on to gain four A/S levels and 3 A levels at grade A at college in Worcester.

Since going to the University of Plymouth he has continued to recover his mobility. He is now on the final year of a Paramedic Practitioner degree course and has also already achieved a DipHe in Paramedic Practice and a BTEC Level 3 in Emergency Ambulance Driving!

So, how did he do it?.....

Simon feels that to cope with challenges you need to set a goal about where you want to go, so you keep motivated and move along in a positive direction. He also suggests that you take all the support you can get to help you on your way:

“Throughout the 5 years of High School and then College, I received regular help and advice from Connexions to choose my subjects and career, and to apply to university.

There were lots of times when it seemed somehow pointless to ‘aim high’, but now I am so thankful that I did and was given the support I needed to get where I am. I have found that if you aim high, and ask for support to help you get there, things do work out for the better, and I was surprised at how achievable my goals became with small steps.”

Although he still has his illness, Simon hasn't let it get in the way, and he's worked hard to regain his mobility and learnt to live independently at university. He finds time to keep fit, play sports with friends and this year has even completed a half marathon!

Simon remains positive about the future:

“Thanks to the support I received, I was able to take lots of positives from my experiences: now that I am going to be working in a healthcare profession, these experiences will enable me to be more understanding and helpful to other people too.”

Jamaal's Story



**Currently studying at
Wolverhampton University
BA Hons International Business Management**

**A Levels in Business Studies
and a
BTEC in Fashion & Textiles**

**School 6th form to
improve GCSEs &
level 2 qualifications**

Looking back on his first few years at school, Jamaal feels that his prospects of eventually gaining qualifications at a high level were poor. At the age of 6 he had been identified as having a hearing problem, and was still struggling with learning at the age of 9 – not managing to achieve the level he should have for his age. After Jamaal’s mum was called into school and told that Jamaal would not achieve, she asked for more help and advice from her family. Family discussions included a strong suggestion that Jamaal should be educated at home, but his mum also had some family support for her belief that school was the right place for him if he had extra help and support with his learning.

Jamaal’s family went into school to ask for help. As a result Jamaal was tested and a Statement of Special Educational Need was put in place in year 5. This Statement meant that Jamaal could get the extra support and help he needed to learn effectively.

As he had to catch up with others of his age, Jamaal kept working hard and stayed on at his Redditch school’s 6th form for three years. He worked on improving his GCSE and level 2 qualifications, in the first year, so that he could progress on to A levels in Business Studies and a BTEC in Fashion and Textiles.

Jamaal is now doing well on a HND in International Business Studies at Wolverhampton University and planning to move on to a degree – an amazing achievement for someone who had so many learning difficulties to overcome!

So, how did he do it?

Jamaal feels that the turning point was when he had the right support and encouragement put in place:

“All the staff at Trinity – the SENCO, teaching staff and teaching assistants – as well as my Connexions Personal Adviser, were really supportive.

In Business Studies, my favourite subject, the teachers were particularly helpful giving me help with strategies, additional work and explanations. This helped my self-confidence and a belief that I could do it.”

He also had practical support from his Connexions Personal Adviser to sort out his higher education application. Jamaal’s advice for other people who are struggling with learning is:

“Do not be afraid, or ashamed, to have and ask for support. Put in the extra work, and stay after school if needed, as the hard work will pay off in the end. You do need the encouragement and belief of others to support you. It can be difficult if you feel different and peers are calling you ‘thick’. With support you can show them you are not ‘thick’.”

Jamaal is upbeat about his future and would like to work in the fashion industry after his Business Degree. He says:

“You can achieve anything in life if you believe in yourself.”



Cornel's Story

**Currently Studying for a
Degree in Theology and Philosophy
Keeble College,
Oxford University**

**A Levels
at
Worcester Sixth Form College**

**GCSEs
at
School**

Gaining a place on a degree course, at Keeble College, Oxford University, after gaining grades at A and A*s in all his GCSEs and four A levels would be a real achievement for many of us - so Cornel's success is even more awesome.

Cornel's future didn't look promising at the start of his life – born severely disabled he was given days to live and left to die in a squalid Romanian orphanage. At the time of his birth there was no acceptance in Romanian society of babies and children with physical or mental disabilities and Cornel was one of many in a similar situation. Following the overthrow of Romania's then President Ceausescu, the outside world started to hear about the country we knew little about - including the horror of Romania's orphanages.

As Cornel desperately needed medical help, permission was eventually given for him to have treatment in the UK – travelling, and living, with a Worcestershire family who had been involved in charitable work in Romania. UK doctors decided that his right leg was so short and twisted that it had to be amputated and Cornel now wears a prosthetic leg and manages with his foreshortened arms.

So, how did he do it?.....

His birth mother in Romania gave permission for Cornel to not only have treatment but also to be adopted by the Worcestershire family who had saved his life.

Cornel has gone on to show what can be done. Whilst doing his A/S levels he visited Oxford University on an open day and was determined to go there:

"I loved Oxford straight away and it sowed the seed for me to go there. I had three interviews and a written exam and I got the offer of a place. I don't let my physical disability stand in my way. I always find solutions to what I cannot do – I'm a fighter."

Cornel was also awarded a Disabled Students Allowance – this can be applied for by students who, due to a physical or mental disability, need to pay for essential extras to live and study at university. Oxford University also offers any additional support he needs - such as his own parking space so that his mobility isn't an issue.

The future now looks bright for Cornel who knows he made the right decision to aim high and go to Oxford:

"I love the sense of community at Oxford and have joined a range of groups including the Christian Union, and the jazz orchestra where I play the drums. The workload came as a shock, not only the volume, but also the standard which is incredibly high. But I can't tell you how privileged I feel to be here among so many astonishing minds and incredibly interesting people."

Stuart's Story



**Currently studying 2nd year of
Joint Honours Degree in Drama and
Screenwriting
at University of Worcester**

**Spends 3 years at Worcester College
of Technology studying
English, maths, psychology, sociology,
drama and history.
Diagnosed with Dyspraxia.**

**Diagnosed with Dyslexia at
school and leaves in year 11**

Stuart didn't take a traditional route to University. At school he was diagnosed with Dyslexia and struggled with his studies—leaving school in year 11. After being out of education for 6 years he made the brave decision to go back into learning to improve his prospects and started at Worcester College of Technology.

Over 3 years at college Stuart studied a range of subjects including English, maths, psychology, sociology, drama and history. At an assessment, arranged whilst he was at college he was diagnosed with Dyspraxia in addition to Dyslexia. To help him with his studies he had support for one hour a week with a learning support tutor.

Now—9 years after leaving school—he is doing well on the second year of a Joint Honours Degree in Drama and Screenwriting at Worcester University.

So, how did he do it?.....

Stuart feels that the support he has had—including equipment such as an adapted computer, learning support and an allowance for printing, copying and books, has helped him to keep going.

He says:

“Don't give up. Things will be hard but the best thing was to see someone for advice and help and get more support.

It took 9 years to get into university but I struggled through. A few people told me I wouldn't handle university—but I wanted it that much more”.

Stuart's learning difficulties have meant that he has had to work extra hard, be determined and plan his workload with care. He says:

“My advice is—don't be afraid of going to university. Since I have been there I have grown in confidence and have had lots of support. I plan my workload and it has helped me to achieve grades that I didn't think I would ever be able to get”.



Amy's Story

Working as a Home School Link Worker to gain experience before becoming a primary school teacher

**Achieved 2:1 BA (Hons)
Primary Initial Teacher Education**

BTEC National Diploma in Early Years

**Leaves school with GCSEs
grades A* - C**

Amy achieved grades at A* - C in all her GCSE subjects and could have gone on to study at A Level—like most people in her year. However, she made a choice to move on to a vocational Advanced Level course—the BTEC National Diploma in Early Years.

“I was keen to start learning about working with children—my main career idea—as soon as I could”.

This was clearly the right choice for Amy as she did extremely well on the course and achieved a triple distinction! She went on to gain a place on a primary teaching degree at Worcester University. Amy feels that her BTEC background has been a real advantage and not just in getting onto the course:

“I’d highly recommend the vocational route into teaching as the BTEC National Diploma in Early Years covers a lot of the same subjects as you do on your primary teaching degree—giving you a very good grounding and knowledge”.

Now in work, after achieving a 2:1 BA (Hons) Primary Initial Teacher Education, Amy feels she is well on her way to achieving her ambitions.

So, how did she do it?.....

Amy had lots of support from her College’s Connexions Personal Adviser—going along to their presentations and talks about careers and higher education and also having several one-to-one interviews. This helped her work out her best next step and what she needed to do.

Having found out just how important work experience is to get a place on a vocational degree she also volunteered at the ASHA Centre alongside her studies—which gave her lots of really valuable experience.

“I would encourage anyone to organise some volunteering work or experience in an area linked with the degree they are applying to”.

Amy is now working as a Home School Link Worker in two primary schools in North Worcestershire—using her degree to work with children who have barriers to learning and helping them, and their parents or carers, to overcome their difficulties. This will also be excellent experience when she moves onto becoming a primary school teacher with her own class. She feels her degree is a real asset:

“All the activities I do in my current job were covered on my degree course—so it was an excellent preparation for work”.

Abi's Story



**BSc Hons Degree
In Animal Sciences**

Cert HE Animal Welfare & Management

Access to Higher Education Course

**Starts work in a Care Home and studies GCSE
English in the evenings**

Abi left school early with no qualifications. After years in care, several care home moves, and a disrupted education, Abi had found it hard to achieve. After starting work in a Care Home, Abi was offered the opportunity to take an NVQ in Care but wasn't sure she was capable or that this was the right career path for her. She took up GCSE English in the evenings to test her capabilities and give herself a little time to decide whether to continue with a career in social care or pursue a career with animals.

Abi completed the GCSE in English and then started a one year Access to Higher Education course. Unfortunately Abi had another major setback during her Access course when she became ill with Fowlers Syndrome—a rare condition which required surgery. Determined to carry on and achieve her Access qualification she managed to complete her coursework in hospital.

Abi's success enabled her to move on to a HND in Animal Welfare, but in her last semester she became very ill with viral encephalitis and this time was unable to finish her course. Medication now controls the epilepsy that this has left her with, but it has meant that her plans had to be put on hold while she recovered.

However, not easily knocked off course, Abi is now taking a BSc Degree in Animal Sciences to qualify her to work with animals. She absolutely loves her degree studies, is doing really well, and is hoping to go on safari in Africa as part of her course.

So, how did she do it?.....

Abi is sure that all the advice and help that she has had in recent years has helped her to achieve—especially the support from her social worker and a mentor she has on her current degree course.

She says ***“It's great having someone on your side to help whenever you need it”***.

Abi's difficulties, her years in care followed by ill health, have meant that she has had to work extra hard, not allow herself to be easily discouraged, and take all the help on offer. Her advice to others who may have difficulties in achieving their ambitions is to:

“Stick with it and don't give up. Accept all the help you get offered—in fact, grab it with both hands! They'll be times when things don't go so well and you start to question it all, but in these circumstances, I recommend ice-cream, especially chocolate!”



Bryony's Story

Currently studying 2nd Year Business Management & Financial Accountancy Degree at Wolverhampton University

Carries on with 2nd year of A Levels during pregnancy

6th Form: Achieves excellent A/S level grades

Leaves school with excellent GCSE grades

Having achieved excellent GCSE and A/S level results, and with good predictions for her A levels, Bryony was planning to move on to a Business and Accounting degree after 6th form.

During the first term of her second year of A levels, Bryony found out she was pregnant, but was determined that this wouldn't stop her in her tracks. She not only continued to keep up with her studies but also moved in with her partner a few weeks before her exams.

Bryony's A level results came out when her daughter was 17 days old and, having achieved her predicted good grades, she was still able to go ahead with her plans to go to university the following month.

Bryony continues to do well and is now on the second year of her Business Management and Financial Accounting degree course at Wolverhampton University.

So, how did she do it?.....

Planning was vital to make sure that Bryony could carry on and achieve her ambitions. She decided that a University near her home town in North Worcestershire was best for her:

"I had wanted to go to Aberystwyth University until I found out I was pregnant – but it's a bit far for my family to help babysit!!"

Although she had childcare plans in place - her Mum was planning to be her granddaughter's main carer whilst Bryony was at university – she prepared her daughter gradually to being cared for and being away from her:

"I'd advise letting your baby get used to being cared for by other members of the family and/or childcare professionals to help them adjust and so that study time is separate from being with your baby. As my daughter is now content with being left in safe hands, this has also meant that I can now send my daughter to nursery for additional childcare support to give me extra study time during my final year."

As she did her exams whilst 32 weeks pregnant her school made special arrangements: **"I was invigilated separately during my exams in case of any surprise arrivals!!"**

Her partner is working full-time to help support Bryony and their daughter and to help her continue to learn she is receiving extra help. Bryony has a Parent's Learning Allowance, to help with the extra costs of being a parent, and when her daughter starts nursery 85 per cent of the nursery costs will be paid for by a childcare grant.

Bryony feels that it is important to keep on with your plans and ambitions:

"You CAN do it - believe in yourself. It isn't always easy but it is very worth it. Ignore the prejudgements and assumptions people will make about you being a young mum and be proud of yourself!!"

People will say that having a baby will 'ruin' your future but it's my experience that you'll have an extra reason to work hard. Knowing my daughter is content and will have a good life gives me the motivation to do the best I can and follow my dreams."

Thank you to all the young people who told their stories
and enabled us to produce this booklet.

Produced by
Support Guidance & Skills Service (Connexions),
Worcestershire County Council.
June 2011.

Further copies are available on our website:
www.connexions-hw.org.uk
or by contacting Lisa Richards (01905) 738900
lrichards2@worcestershire.gov.uk

