

CHANCE OF A LIFETIME

One had a mother he never saw. The other's mum was an alcoholic. Both were skipping school. But an Adelaide youth program has given them the tools to turn their lives around.

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The sound of knocking shook 14-year-old Kit Saisaard out of a deep sleep. At the door was his Year 9 teacher asking why he wasn't at school again. Saisaard was speechless, mostly because no-one ever came to their door. What reason could he give his teacher? The truth? That he was sleeping off an entire night of playing video games.

Saisaard, now 18, of Davoren Park, came to Australia with his mother from Thailand at the age of seven. She was seeking better prospects for her and her son. There were no siblings, and Kit's Thai father had little contact with his son since birth.

On arrival in Australia, Saisaard's mother, with limited education and no English, took on manual labouring work, leaving the house at 3am to start work on farms in the Adelaide Hills, and not returning until 3pm seven days a week, with little time to spend with her young son.

Saisaard was lonely and struggled to make strong connections with his school mates. Holed up alone in his room on weeknights and weekends he sought comfort in video games. By the time he was 14, he was regularly missing school just so he could stay home to play. His school raised the issue with his mother.

This caused a further deterioration in an already strained relationship, with Saisaard blaming her for leaving him alone so much.

He spent the next half of Year 9 skipping school, failing classes, continuing to play video games and arguing with his mother. Life might have stayed that way if not for an organisation called Youth Opportunities – a not for profit organisation that partners with many SA high schools.

Saisaard had moved schools and was attending Playford International High School in Year 10 when Youth Opportunities representatives came to his school and talked about the organisation's personal leadership program. As the trainers explained its benefits, something resonated.

"It was when they said it would help young people to become more confident within themselves. I knew this was something that was definitely missing inside me," Saisaard says.

His biggest issue was relationships. He felt that his contribution in social situations wasn't important and wasn't sought by others. So his Youth Opportunities trainer set him a personal task. He had to talk to at least three strangers a day for a week.

It took him out of his comfort zone but achieved what it needed to. He found that his contribution was indeed worthwhile and he started to believe in himself. He began to make stronger connections and enjoy a social life at last. And with an improvement in his relationships, he began to enjoy school, too.

It was the start of a new chapter. But he still had a relationship that needed work and that was with his mother.

He wanted to tell her to spend more time with him, that he needed her love. He had felt like her housemate, not her son. Fearful of the conversation, his trainer scripted it for him. Saisaard remembers it as an emotional moment when he sat down with his mum. Although the conversation felt awkward, she agreed to spend one day a week together. And so they did.

"The time we spent together was pretty interesting," Saisaard says. "I had to develop a whole new relationship with my mum since we didn't ever hang out together. It was a challenge but over time my relationship with my mum slowly got better."

Saisaard is now in his second year of university, studying computer science. Since graduating from school, he has received financial help through several Youth Opportunity scholarships which have paid for driving lessons, a mentor and a laptop. It has all helped get him on the right track but the ability to make those stronger connections in his life has been the biggest gift.

"If I didn't have those friendships in my later years of high school, I wouldn't be where I am now," he says. "It has completely changed my perspective on life for the better."

Youth Opportunities offers a 10-week leadership training course to Year 10 students to teach them a wide range of skills and tools. Significantly, the support doesn't end there. Graduates are followed up to ensure they stay on track for the rest

of their school lives. The organisation also raises money to ensure young people experiencing social and economic disadvantage can access its programs and services, subsidising program costs for those schools where there is an evident need for such support. Through its donors, Youth Opportunities also offers scholarships to leadership course graduates facing financial difficulties in pursuing their academic goals.

It has supported about 13,500 young South Australians. Last year, more than 90 per cent of program graduates reported an improvement in their self-esteem, their relationships and their motivation in school.

Courtney Grigg, 33, works as a trainer and manager with Youth Opportunities. She holds a degree in government and public policy management and a diploma in human resources. She adores her job and is happily married with two young boys.

But life wasn't always this good. Her parents separated when she was 12, sparked by her mother's mental health problems and alcoholism. Too embarrassed to bring friends home, Grigg spent much of her early teens feeling isolated and angry with her mother. Returning home from school to find her mother drunk would spark constant arguments between them. She began to hang out with friends who were going off the rails and skipping school, sharing a "who cares?" attitude.

Youth Opportunities trainers came to Salisbury High School when she was 15. The

trainers asked the students to consider whether they were feeling happy with their lives, with themselves, their relationships.

"I remember sitting there thinking, 'Yeah, I'm not happy and even though I'm showing the world I don't care I actually do care. I'm sick of being angry and sick of not feeling in control of my life'," she says.

She got into the program but she was sceptical. She remembers thinking it was all a bit of a joke and that she was too far gone for any of it to help her. But she went back the next week and the next, and things began to change.

Chief executive Erin Faehrmann says Youth Opportunities teaches concepts that are likely to cover numerous branches of psychological theory but turn them into powerful yet easy-to-grasp symbolism for students.

For example, "sending stars" refers to positive communication that makes yourself and other people feel good, and negative communications are referred to as "black holes". For Grigg, understanding about how people communicate helped her see what was happening with her mother.

"I started to shift my thinking from feeling angry when I felt like mum was sending me black holes by acting the way she was, to how I could help her and that was to send her more stars."

She began to recognise that when her mum was doing this it was because her own self-image was poor. With Grigg's shift in

