

Chances make a case for Jonathon

“I appreciate having this opportunity to write a little about the enormous impact Chances for Children had on my life and that of my family. I will forever be indebted to Chances for the opportunities they provided me”

WORDS **JONATHON WENHAM**



Chances for Children is in its 18th year and to date the program has assisted over 1850 young people from our community to realise their goals.

Chances provides financial and personal support to young people up to the age of 24 to assist them to reach their potential in educational, sport and cultural pursuits.

The program works to ensure that financial constraints and lack of support do not stand in the way of a young person's ability to reach their potential.

Chances is a program of Mallee Family Care. It is set aside from other funds and programs in that it is locally based, established and supported by the local community both financially and in-kind by local business and individuals. To continue the work of Chances for Children, the program relies heavily upon the commitment of our community.

Jonathon Wenham is a Chances alumni and passionate supporter of the program. When asked to share his story Jonathon didn't hesitate.

HOW DID I COME TO CHANCES?

I was always a book kid (less charitably, you might also say a common or garden variety nerd). Happiest when hiding in a corner with something to read, I was probably fated for an office job. This tendency was reinforced by my famous clumsiness and complete lack of anything approaching a physical skill, which seemed to cut me off from a number of more practical job pathways!

I was one of the very lucky few who realised in year 10 exactly what I wanted to do after school. I did work experience almost by accident with a local lawyer, and immediately realised that this was what I wanted to do, and what I (with all the confidence of youth) thought I would be good at. University called!

Law at university in the distant past (i.e. 2010) required an ATAR of at least the mid-90s. Knowing that I needed to focus on study, I opted not to get a part-time job in favour of giving myself more time to study (and let's be honest - more time to procrastinate!) I frustrated every career advisor I spoke to with my blatant refusal to do maths or science in years 11 and 12. Because I didn't need either

as a prerequisite, and I found both to be rather unexciting, I ditched them in favour of the humanities despite all advice to the contrary. I am the first to recommend that people take advice on board when it is well-meant, but there are times when you just need to trust yourself, back yourself, and go, and this was one of them for me. I knew what I wanted, I'd researched how to get there, and so onward I went. Fortunately for me, the gamble paid off and I scored the grades I needed to achieve my dream!

Unfortunately, like almost everything in life, achieving my dream also needed something less easy to come by than grades - cash. My parents are small business owners and very hard working, but we were in the midst of the Global Financial Crisis at the time and there wasn't a lot of money to spare.

University fees are generally able to be deferred via the HECS-HELP system, but there are still a huge range of expenses for a country kid who needs to move away to study. Travel, textbooks (which are unreasonably expensive), living expenses, accommodation - when I was trying to cost it all I realised that we couldn't afford it on our own even on the cheapest available options. I desperately tried for work in the summer, but with the economy what it was I couldn't find part-time work at the time. I applied for a bunch of scholarships, and won some, but they don't get paid out until mid-semester in most cases so they can be useless for the early expenses! I was also receiving Student Allowance from Centrelink, but even combined these amounts weren't enough to allow me to move to a new city for study.

It was incredibly stressful and disheartening to think that the dream I'd devoted my whole life to for the last three years might slip away at the last moment. It may have been possible to work through a gap year to raise funds, but as mentioned already it was difficult to get work and in any case I was already facing five years in university to get my degrees. If I needed to defer even further, it just delayed life that much more.

That's when the local guardian angels saved the day! Through a teacher at my school who knew we were struggling we got put in touch with Chances for Children and I met a Chances caseworker (among several other heroes!) for the first time. I explained my situation, and almost cried when I heard that this fantastic organisation existed exactly to help kids like me.

WHAT DID CHANCES DO?

Chances see the potential in our local kids and do everything that they can to help us unlock our opportunities and have the life we dreamed of. I sat down with my Chances caseworker in that summer of 2010 and we made a budget for the year. I didn't know it then, but we'd go on to do this every year until I didn't need it any more.

Because of Chances, I got a chance to test my dream. A new world was opened up to me - shining, shimmering, and splendid (sneaky Disney reference). In all seriousness, the support (in terms of both knowledge and funds) was the difference between me being the first person in my family to go to university and me being forced to give up on the only thing I'd wanted for the future.



It's so much more than just a handout when you're in the Chances program. I never engaged with the formal mentoring process, but had regular catch-ups with my Chance's case worker and other members of Chances just to ensure everything was on track, that I was going well and coping.

Chances have a great network of local contacts, and as a result were able to arrange for me to spend a month working for Martin Irwin and Richards during the summer one year. This was a fantastic and



eye-opening experience into what actually practising law is like in a small town.

I will forever be grateful for the opportunities Chances made it possible for me to pursue. That initial support has meant so much and left me a great debt to pay! I will always do whatever I can do to support Chances out of gratitude and appreciation for their support of me.

WHAT HAPPENED AFTERWARDS?

In 2013 I was honoured to receive the inaugural Bob Piper Scholarship. Funded generously by Piper Alderman, it was the largest scholarship I ever received and meant that from that time on I no longer needed financial support from Chances.

As the Bob Piper Scholar I was also able to make my first fledgling connections into the legal network in Adelaide, and ultimately was given a chance to work for Piper Alderman through my final year of law school. There was a bit of work behind landing that role, but combined with a healthy dose of luck I managed to land it!

Fast-forwarding three years, I'm now 25 (although I am in denial about that) and a flourishing commercial lawyer. One of the reasons I came to law in the first place was because I saw it as a vehicle to affect change, a way to make a difference to the world (or maybe even just one person). Forever a dreamer, I strive to walk the talk and contribute to building a better world. My current position allows me to begin doing just that.

For all of us, at any time, the future is not a single road. It might be easier if it was! I would love to think that everyone can be supported (like I was by Chances) to explore some of the many twisting, surprising pathways that pop up from time to time. There will always be problems, battles, and burdens, but it's important to remember that there is fun, hope, and opportunity there too!

With the irreplaceable support of Chances and a buffet of wonderful people, I managed to reach my first dreams. I hope that my future includes a steady career as a lawyer and more and more advocacy work. I hope that our collective future includes our youth being able to chase their dreams and smash through every obstacle that tries to block them! *

If you would like to learn more about how your organisation, or you as an individual, could assist Chances to support young people like Jonathon achieve their goals, please contact Jackie Heaysman on (03) 5021 7479 or by email jheaysman@malleefamilycare.com.au.