



ANOTHER FRESH SUCCESS STORY

No one could have anticipated Mark Cholodniuk's transformation from a student who struggled to progress in early high school to one that has not only attained his Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) qualification, but one who has also graduated as the 2011 Student of the Year in the Western Bulldogs Fresh Program.



“I am one of the only people in my family to pass Year 12 so it is a pretty good achievement... My nan recommended Fresh because my uncle went there when it first started.”

Enrolling in the Fresh Program provided just that - fresh opportunities, a fresh start and a fresh outlook on life.

“In mainstream [schooling] I failed year 7, 8, 9 and 10, so I didn't pass anything,” Mark said.

“I am one of the only people in my family [to pass Year 12] so it is a pretty good achievement... My nan recommended Fresh because my uncle went there when it first started.

“Everyone is happy and proud of me... they didn't think I could do it either,” he joked.

The Fresh program provides a community education service for students aged 15 – 20 who are experiencing difficulties in mainstream education.

The program – underpinned by practical work, community projects and increased flexibility – is focussed on developing students' academic, social and work related skills to prepare them for adult life.

Claiming to have changed from an “angry and trouble ridden person” to a fun loving joker, the Fresh program influenced a lot more than Mark's education.

“I think it was the new environment and the students around me were more understanding as well as the teachers, just more encouraging, just a better place for me as a person,” he said.

“Fresh made me open my eyes and realise the world for what it is compared to what I used to think of it, which was basically to just make trouble.

“I woke up I guess, it was just a thing of the moment where I thought that I really need to keep studying so I pass.

“I started to buckle down and pass as much as I could and that is when my grades started going up and I started attending every day instead of missing a lot of days.”

Simply attending the program became a highlight for Mark as he began to embrace the opportunity put in front of him.

“If I stayed at home I am not going to see anyone or be able to do anything but if I go I can see people and learn and help develop myself,” he said.

“I made a lot of close friends and all the students there - even if you don't really talk to them, they are still your friends, they don't ignore you and everyone understands you.

“Everyone just has a joke but still does their work, [it's] usually just a good vibe and everyone is happy.”

Scared of the thought of how his life could have turned out, the community work that Mark undertook as part of the program helped him appreciate the opportunity to reinvent himself.

“I'd like to thank the program and all the teachers and students for helping me grow personally and for what they are doing for the community,” he said.

Mark believes that the community work throughout his time at Fresh with people with disability and those who are disadvantaged also helped him grow as a person.

Another main aspect that prompted his turning point was the reciprocal respect between teachers and students.

“The teachers approach you more and explain the work and help you through it. I think it was the respect going both ways that made things easier as well.”

Mark's teacher, Adam Densley believes his strength of character will put him in good stead for his future endeavours.

“Mark is a very inspirational person, he has taken real ownership of his education and life choices and has stuck to them with great tenacity,” Densley said.

“He has a fantastic sense of humour and is an absolute pleasure to be around.

“With a strength of character as strong as Marks' I can only see great things in his future and wish him all the best.” ■■