

Education is the key to success and giving back

Kortana Cullen-Blissett is a proud 20-year-old Biripi woman from Taree, living on Darug land in western Sydney. Kortana is currently studying a Bachelor of Arts (Pathway to Teaching Primary) at Western Sydney University's Penrith campus, with dreams of becoming a primary teacher.

When Kortana started High School, she took part in Pathways to Dreaming, a cultural based program which encourages mob to aspire to university education, run by Western. In year nine Kortana changed High School and was upset to think she would have to leave the program.

After doing her own research and speaking with her Pathways to Dreaming Project Officers, Kortana used her determination to work with her teachers and Principal to help bring the program to her new school, so that she and her classmates could participate in the program and the opportunities it offers.

Spark to a flame

In High School, through the support of her music and drama teachers, Kortana developed a passion for art, drama and music which helped her build a community of friends and helped develop her spark of excitement into a flame.

She knew that she wanted to become a teacher of music and drama.

It was while she was taking part in the Pathways to Dreaming program, that Kortana first heard of the Indigenous Pathways Entry Program.

The Indigenous Pathways Entry Program is a way for mob to gain entry into Western Sydney University, that's not dependent upon an ATAR or prior study.

Kortana was reassured to find that there was a way for her to get into university and achieve her dream of becoming a teacher.

"With the subjects I was studying for Year 12, I knew my ATAR wasn't potentially going to be the strongest, so to have the additional safety net of the Indigenous Pathways Program was reassuring," said Kortana.

Initially, Kortana was apprehensive about the Indigenous Pathway Program assessment process and remembers feeling unsure about her abilities to pass the assessments.

Control

"I like to have a certain amount of control, which helps me to keep the anxiety of new experiences from becoming overwhelming," said Kortana.

"Though the moment I got through the first assessment, I felt like a weight was lifted and I



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understood that I was capable. It was a relief to be able to take that confidence into the next round of assessments."

Kortana found the exams within the Indigenous Pathway Entry Program were designed to support Indigenous students. The assessments and readings were all in plain English and were focused on issues related to mob and other Indigenous issues.

"They are designed to help you succeed and to feel supported through the process with time to reset your thinking between assessments," she said.

Since commencing at Western Sydney University, Kortana has continued to be uplifted by the ongoing support from both her family and the University. The jovial rivalry between her and her aunty is one of things that keeps her

motivated to keep working towards her goals.

"Knowing that I will finish my degree journey with a Master's degree, my Aunty now is saying that she might have to come back to University to keep up," she said.

Support

She has also found support from within the Badanami Centre for Indigenous Education which provides a sanctuary for Indigenous students on campus. "The Badanami team have been amazing, they help you work through any issues you are having, or even just provide a place of safety and security after a long day of classes."

Kortana has received two scholarships from Western Sydney University, the Indigenous Smart Start Grant and the Eucharistic Community Scholarship for Aboriginal

Women. These scholarships have supported her with the costs associated with commencing university.

Having previously been working four jobs, the scholarships have allowed her to take a step back, knowing that she has the support to pay for things like her textbooks, equipment and parking. This has relieved the pressure of needing to work more hours and has given her the ability to focus on her studies.

Working as an Indigenous Student Ambassador, Kortana has found a way to give back to the programs that helped her immeasurably during High School, by going to Careers Markets and Schools, to give advice and support to the next generation of students.

In the future, Kortana is looking at ways she will be able to support her mob, to bring

widespread education to communities and ensuring that young Indigenous people are able to set out on a path where education is not a barrier.

She is hoping to work towards an executive role within a school and applying for the Department of Education's FASTstream program, which helps teachers to accelerate their career to school principalship.

Advice

Her advice for Indigenous people looking to start out on their higher education journey.

"Trust your intuition, it will lead you in the right direction. Don't ever feel embarrassed about asking for help. Your ancestors want you to succeed, and Western will help you make it possible. Find that support from your peers or other support structures within the University".