

Never Too Late To Learn

By Rachel Loveday

Women are climbing higher on the career ladder and with a female Prime Minister, Governor-General and Attorney-General; this encourages women that they can achieve anything with their careers. However to climb the career ladder, women need to be educated. A good number of you reading this would have a Bachelor's degree. However not all women can attend university, so they have to find alternative ways to obtain the skills that they need.

Wollongong woman, Petah Felton, 56, found a way when she enrolled in the Career Education for Women (CEW) courses at TAFE Illawarra ten years ago and has never looked back. She found the courses after researching on the internet.

"I had seen this course on the TAFE website, how it encouraged women to come back (to TAFE) if they wanted to further their education or get a job, which suited me, since I'd spent years raising children, it had been years since I worked. It had been through my own resourcing that I found this course at that time and it turned out to be really good."

It did end up turning out good for her, after spending years away from the workforce raising her six children, she decided it was her turn to learn new skills and she reaped many rewards. Not only did she learn essential workforce and life skills, she also made friends and gained self-confidence.

"It was good to get out of the house; I wasn't isolated as a mother. Not only was I learning new skills, I was learning to be with people again and I was going to outings, it increased my self confidence amongst people."

Ellen van Haren, Head Teacher of Communications and Media at TAFE NSW and instructor of the CEW courses, says that the women that she teaches come from a variety of backgrounds, however it is not uncommon for women to come from similar circumstances to Petah's.

"We get a big mix (of women) and they have skills, but the workforce changes all the time. Some of the women may have been retrenched or need to up skill. You might get women who have looked after children for four or five years, which doesn't seem like a long time, but it is for them. And they do believe that things have dramatically changed. So they would come and do this course."

There are also Work Opportunities for Women (WOW) courses which also teach vocational skills but also explore specific areas such as photography, floristry and interior decorating. Jennie Valutha, instructor of the WOW courses at the Illawarra campuses explains that women who take WOW courses also gain confidence but also that the women that are not set in stone in the courses that they take and the skills that they learn.

“The WOW courses are specifically designed to teach women new skills and find a new pathway for them at TAFE. We (her and Ellen) know that by teaching them a new skill in a vocational area gives them the option to realise that they have the skills to do lots of things, so they might come and do the photography course, for example and they may decide not to continue with photography, but they’ve learnt a skill and gained confidence and whilst they’re at TAFE, we can say ‘maybe photography’s not for you, so let’s investigate something else.’”

These courses were first established in 1981 after an announcement by then NSW Premier Neville Wran that the state government would provide funding a one-year retraining program specifically for women, in particular as there was a lack of access of vocational education for mature-age women. Over thirty years later, these courses are still running across the state and women as young as seventeen and eighteen are enrolling.

Both Ellen and Jennie teach interpersonal communication skills to help the women in their classes balance their studies and family lives and are also trying to teach women that they can have it all.

“They (the women in their classes) learn interpersonal communication, that gives them a lot of confidence and assertion to start to say what they believe in,” Ellen says

“What we were getting away from in the eighties is the model that the wife did what the husband said and was expected to look after the kids and not have a career—their first priority was their husband and children and that was starting to change, but that model was still pretty strong.”

Jennie adds that this model and way of thinking is still present with women today and they try to raise awareness in their students that they can work around this.

“Women still feel with children that, that (being only a mother) is their role. They still carry guilt, if they’re not there. They still feel that they have to put their children first and that they do have to do everything. We let them know it is okay to do both and to let go and that it doesn’t matter if dinner’s not on the table right on six o’clock, there are ways around that. But it certainly takes a long time to break those beliefs down in society. Society still sees that women are the homemakers.”

Although this is a common belief amongst the women in their classes, Petah Felton was lucky enough to have her family support her during her education. Her children would sit with her at the dinner table and do their homework as she was doing theirs.

“We’d sit together at the dinner table of a night and we would discuss all of this (her course), it brought the family together and there was something else to talk about. The course opened up communication within the family, which wouldn’t have happened if I was just at home.”

After she completed the CEW courses, Petah went on to study the TPC—Tertiary Preparation Course, the TAFE Higher School Certificate equivalent, which she will be finishing in a few short weeks. This was after working at the University of Wollongong’s UniShop for four years. Petah says that after she finishes her TPC she will be taking an overseas holiday and she is determined to have a career after she finishes her education and when she returns from her holiday.

“The teachers tell you ‘don’t think you’re too old to get a job,’ I’ll never feel that way.”