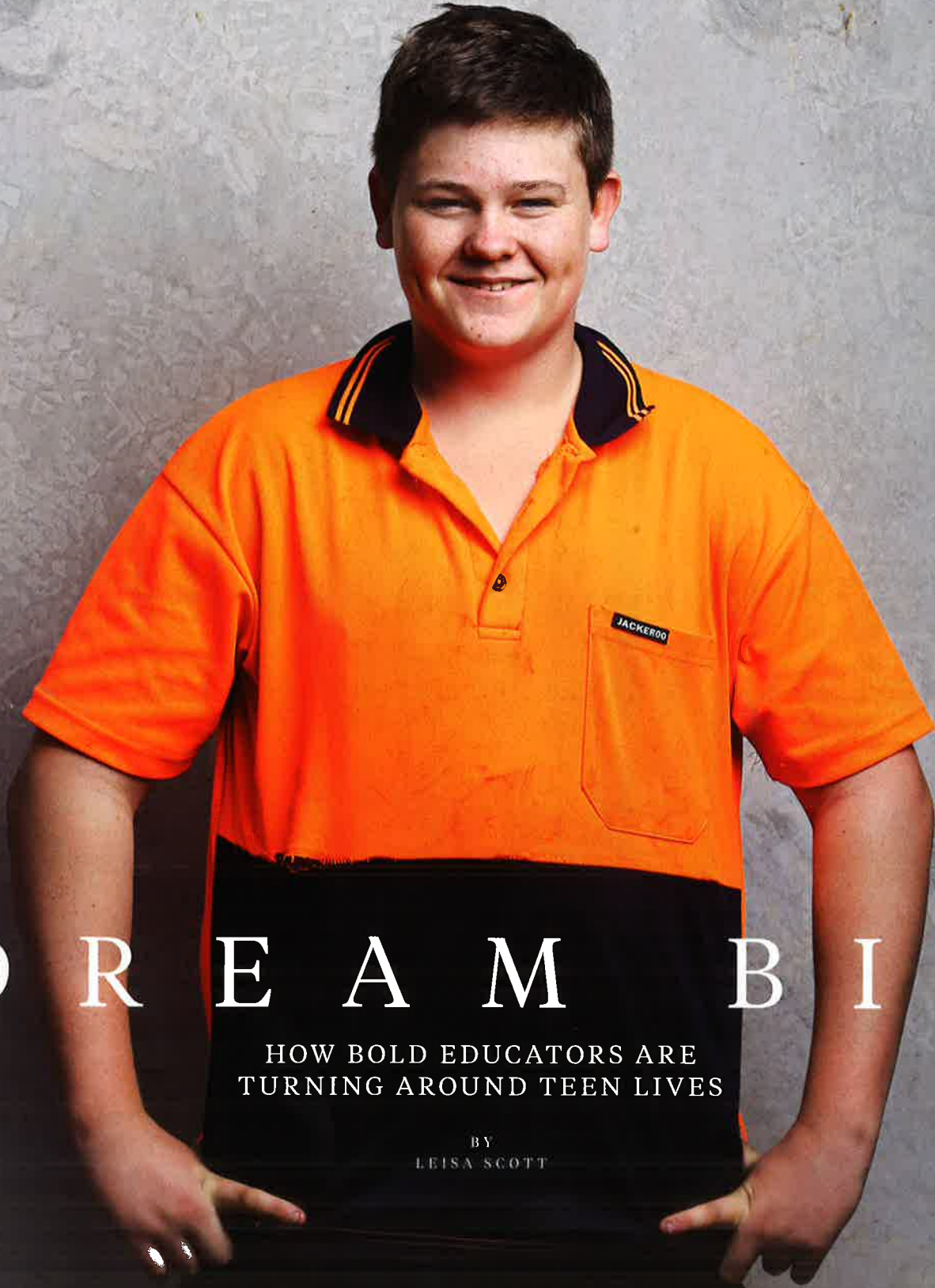


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D R E A M B I G

HOW BOLD EDUCATORS ARE
TURNING AROUND TEEN LIVES

BY
LEISA SCOTT



TAMING THE WILD

Calming music tinkles as images of sunrises, wispy clouds and lilies appear on a big screen, but amid the air of tranquility, eyes are peeled for wild dogs. We're not out bush, though. We're not even outside. We're in Logan City, south of Brisbane, at the morning gathering of the YMCA Vocational School, and while the students listen to wise words about honesty, teachers and youth workers are surveying their charges. Are they settled, ready to learn? Or has something triggered their anger or anxiety? Have they, in the parlance of this unusual school, veered into wild dog territory?

Two of the students don't look right to the staff. Snarly, fidgety, distracted. Wild dogs. As the session wraps up, youth workers go and talk with them while the rest of the cohort heads to class. The pair will need some time to get their heads right. They might take a break in the recovery room with its mood lighting and salt lamps to try to refocus on the day. Or they could unburden themselves to the youth worker, willing to share some of their turmoils with someone they have come to trust. When they feel calm enough to rejoin the class, they will.

"We have developed a culture where we are in this together," says the head of school, Gary Smith, who interviews all potential students in a five- to ten-day process which starts with a referral by schools, child safety or youth justice agencies. "I know you, you know me. I know when you're cranky and how to manage it. I know who you are under the façade you put up; come in being tough when I know you're just ready to cry.

THE CLASSROOM IS LIKE NONE THEY'VE EVER SEEN WITH ITS MOOD LIGHTING, OIL BURNERS AND BACKGROUND MUSIC. BUT FOR KIDS DOGGED BY FAILURE IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATION, IT'S THE CALM, PERSONAL ATTENTION THEY RECEIVE IN SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS THAT SETS THEM STRAIGHT.

STORY

LEISA SCOTT

PHOTOGRAPHY

RUSSELL SHAKESPEARE

"This is not a power-over situation, which the mainstream [education system] tends to be. It's a work-with situation. But you can't work with a wild dog."

Those students who blame the world and take no responsibility for their actions are also counselled. The aim is for all to become, not necessarily academic whizzes, but calm, settled and in control. Just why these two students are on edge today could be due to any number of factors. Mum was drunk and abusive last night. A police visit. They might have a learning disability and someone called them dumb. Something on the train triggered a childhood trauma. Life became too heavy for someone not resilient enough to take the weight.

Not yet, anyway. The hope is that, at this school, they will learn how to cope. Mainstream education didn't work for them. It was too impersonal and too busy; they were too loud or too vulnerable, or live with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or other behavioural and learning issues. They were expelled, suspended or bullied. Now the YMCA campus – one of 23 Special Assistance Schools across 26 sites in Queensland – is their last shot at a formal education.

"For a lot of kids, failure is a safe place," says Smith. "Our whole philosophy is about giving kids a real opportunity to succeed where maybe they haven't had those opportunities."

THE CORVETTE CHASSIS NEEDS A SAND and those pistons have to go back in the engine block. No dramas. Young men get stuck into the >



HEAD START ... KARALEE
HEATH, 17, TRAINS AS A
HAIRDRESSER AT LOGAN CITY
YMCA VOCATIONAL SCHOOL.

day's work in their four-hoist automotive workshop, keen to get under way. Most of them, at least. There's a couple of newcomers fawning about taking selfies near the Corvette but, if they're anything like Bryce Frisby, they'll change.

The bright-eyed Frisby, 16, has dreams of becoming a diesel mechanic and is busy working on the engine. He's been here for more than a year and already achieved his Certificate II in automotive work, and is training for the next level. "It's all I want to do," he says. He's done a complete 180 from the dope-smoking, teacher-kicking, school-evader he once was. He reckons he found the size of his old school too big – "I can't handle crowds, I start freaking out" – and that he was "dumb". He started smoking marijuana at 14 and after getting into trouble at school, stopped going. When his parents told him to go to school, "I was just, nup". Then they heard about the YMCA campus. He went along but with little conviction. "I came here a couple of times when I was stoned."

Did the teachers and youth workers notice? "Oh, yeah. That's when I stopped." Frisby says they talked with him about why he smoked and why he thought he was dumb. They listened, helped him, he got sick of forgetting things, and he changed. "I'm still a bit dumb," he says, although he's smiling as he says it. "I'm getting better, though. I'm heaps better now. It took me like 20 minutes to do my 10 times tables. Now it's like five minutes."

Maths and English are core subjects but the



HELPING HAND ... "WE GIVE KIDS AN OPPORTUNITY TO SUCCEED," SAYS GARY SMITH, HEAD OF THE YMCA SCHOOL.

classrooms are like none they've seen in mainstream schools. Teachers control mood lighting with smartphone apps; background music with an 80-beats-per-minute rhythm similar to the foetal heart rate plays. Oil burners emit soothing scents and soft furnishings such as cube chairs are used. "It's set up to meet that subconscious need for belonging and safety," says Smith. There are even textured pillows to hug.

Smith says a chance meeting with education consultant Sarah Ralston soon after he took over the

reins of the school in January 2012 helped shape the school's approach. "Staff have really engaged with ongoing learning around the effects of trauma on human beings, particularly on the brain and brain development of young adolescents," he says. "A lot of our students come from backgrounds where there are past traumas, abuse – physical, emotional, substance – and neglect."

Many students have developed a "flight, fight, freeze or giggle" response to trauma or challenges, says Smith. The students are taught about these reactions and how to recognise and overcome them. Breathing techniques are part of that, and some students are so highly strung that slowing down their breath can be a frightening experience.

"If you are always in the state of fright or flight, your breath is short, shallow, ready to go," says Smith, who says it's the science that drives the meditation therapy, not New Ageism. "Getting kids expanding their ribcages and really taking a deep breath is a shock. And it can be quite violent – tears, tantrums, refusal to take part – because it's scary. Their whole state, from being an infant, has been a state of flight, fright, freeze, I need to be ready, on guard. They just have no idea of the concept of peace."

Students still lash out. In one of my visits, a young man came thundering down the stairs, swearing and gesticulating wildly. A youth worker kept an eye on him for a few minutes before going over to talk. All staff are trained in how to restrain people but Smith says that has not been required for years. Long-term students



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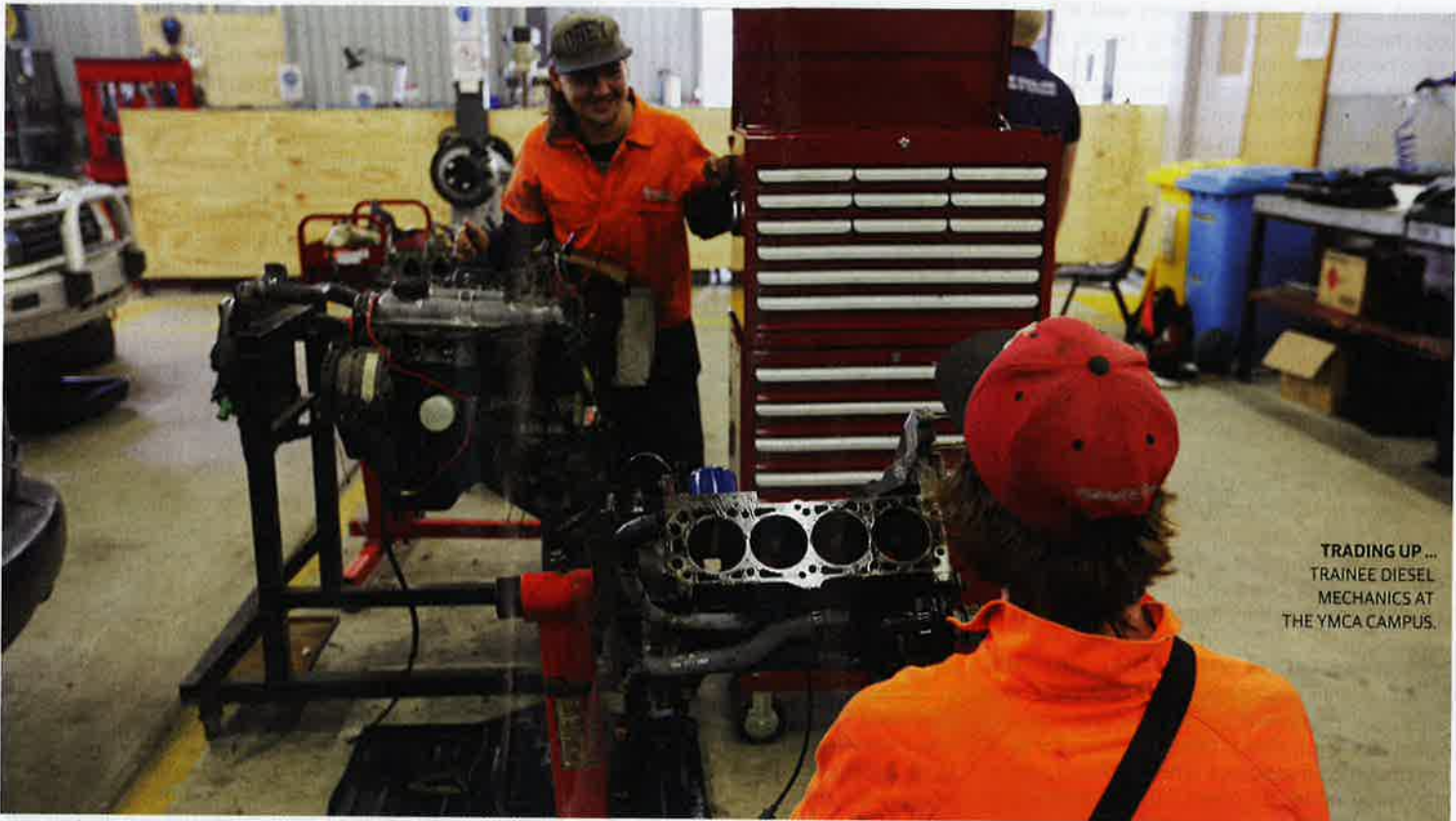
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TRADING UP...
TRAINEE DIESEL
MECHANICS AT
THE YMCA CAMPUS.

have now adopted the language of the school – “Daniel’s a bit wild dog, I’ve left him alone”. He says newcomers often bring their old ways to the school but are soon set straight by the students. “You’ll get kids standing up and gathering around the teacher and saying, ‘That’s not how you speak to Sir. That’s not how we do it here.’”

BY HER OWN ADMISSION, TAYLOR-JADE Wilkinson, 17, was a very angry girl when she arrived at the YMCA campus four years ago. A difficult home life, frequent school changes and an inability to fit in made her “lose it” at the slightest hiccup. Proudly, she tells how she recently calmly retraced her steps to find something she’d misplaced. “A teacher said to me, ‘If that happened three years ago, you’d be going crazy’. And I’m like ‘Yeah, but going psycho is not going to find it’.

“I like it here, I think it really helps. Because I’ve been here so long, I’ve seen people come in, the newbies, and they come in here and think they’re going to run it but it’s not like that, because everyone sticks together. It worked for me and I’m sure it will work for many other people.”

We’re chatting in the school’s professionally set-up hairdressing salon where Wilkinson and Karalee Heath, also 17, are washing and braiding Cortney’s hair as part of their training for certificates in hairdressing. Cortney is just a plastic head with hair. Heath and Wilkinson are real people with real prospects.

Well-groomed and softly spoken, Heath doesn’t

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GARY SMITH,
YMCA VOCATIONAL SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

seem like a brawler but, at her old school, “I got into lots of fights”. “Sticking up for myself and my sister. My sister used to get bullied all the time and I’d always be there to have her back because that’s what sisters do.”

It was, she says, “a really big rough patch”. Since coming to this school two years ago, she has found her “happy place” through hairdressing – and acceptance. “I come every day, always in a happy mood and always happy to see my friends, who are actually true friends. They teach you so much stuff here and they show you how to do stuff the right way. They really turn your life around.”

And if she hadn’t come here? “I’d probably be sitting at home doing nothing all day.”

That’s one of the typical responses the University of Queensland’s Professor Martin Mills gets when he asks young people what they’d be up to if special assistance schools did not exist. Others include “crime”, “drugs”, and “I’d be dead”. Says the education expert with special interest in disengaged youth: “So it seems to me they’re playing a really important role in terms of supporting young people.”

Suspensions and exclusions in mainstream schools have been rising in Queensland, with a report released in April finding they had increased by 24 per cent during 2006-2013 compared with a total enrolment increase of 12 per cent. Other statistics from Education Queensland found laws that took effect at the start of last year giving principals greater powers led to suspensions jumping by more than 3000 in the first semester of 2014 compared with the first semester of 2013.

The demand for special assistance schools is growing, evidenced by the YMCA, which three years ago had the Logan campus at Kingston, 30km south of Brisbane, with five staff and 40 students. Now there are two sites – the other in the northern suburb of North Lakes – and 24 staff and 160 kids. It’s set to open another campus in Ipswich and a junior campus at Kingston. “I think there are some lessons there for mainstream schools,” says Mills. “What>

special assistance schools do very well is provide opportunities to listen to young people and the young people can make contributions to how they're learning, what they're learning, when they're learning in a way that isn't taken up in mainstream schools.

"My only concern with the increased number is, does it mean it's an easy option for addressing issues in mainstream schools? Do they say to these young people, 'Maybe you should try the special assistance school down the road rather than staying here?'" For his part, Smith says he occasionally interviews students who think they might get an easy ride at the school but they don't get in. He tells them, "You're not disengaged, you're just being a princess."

As for how successful the schools are, Smith and Mills say the flow-on benefits of reshaping a young person's approach to life cannot be effectively quantified. Sure, a job and a Queensland Certificate of Education are a measure, but there is more. "This is about kids," says Smith. "Not about data. Let's develop well-rounded, holistic young people who are able to add value to society." Or as Mills prefers, citing a quote often attributed to Albert Einstein: "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

THE KANGAROOS THAT LIVE ON THIS sprawling semi-rural property at Deception Bay, north of Brisbane, will not be attending class but Sparky, the dog, is already bustling through the door. Different special assistance school, different type of dog. This is Arethusa College and Sparky is a kelpie, with the big job of bringing a smile to the students and helping keep them calm. The boys in the class, all dressed in hi-vis uniforms, give the pooch a pat and say g'day as they settle down in one of the standalone buildings dotted about the 30-hectare grounds for a briefing about the week ahead.

Sparky is a fantastic resource for moderating behaviour, says principal Liz Flodine. "I was going around the classes, saying hello with Sparky, and there was a student who was high on the [autism]



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS ... TRADE STUDENTS AT ARETHUSA COLLEGE, DECEPTION BAY, INTERACT WITH SPARKY THE KELPIE.

spectrum, rolling around on the floor, having a moment," she says. "So I've pretended to be the dog talking to him." She puts on a deepish, doggish voice. "Hey, how come you're not at your desk?" The student answered the dog, they chatted for a while, and the boy went back to his desk.

Before Flodine arrived at Arethusa, she taught gifted and talented children. Now she's working with a school population of which 75 to 80 per cent "have letters after their name – such as ADHD, or ASD [autism spectrum disorder], or an intellectual impairment or an anxiety disorder". Both forms of teaching are fantastic, she says, but this "has the greater need. And the rewards are wonderful".

Take the email from a former student, Dave, that lobbed in her inbox at the start of the year. Dave reveals in the email that he left the school two years ago and lives interstate. The grammar is not the best, admits Flodine, but the sentiment warmed her heart. It reads, verbatim: "I must say that when I have been at your school for almost 5

years of learning, you's have really made my life better. I know realise what you's all said was true." Dave promises to visit next time he's in Queensland.

At the heart of Arethusa teaching is RSVP: respect, safety, value and participation. The latter is a big one. At their old schools, many could not keep up. So they fell behind. Then stopped trying. Some arrive at Arethusa without knowing the alphabet.

Others are gun-shy. Flodine says she was struck by the hesitancy of students to answer questions to which they knew the answers. "They've been knocked back so many times – you know, 'you're dumb', 'that's wrong' – so they won't take a risk." Smaller classes, more one-on-one time, and building a relationship with teachers and youth workers help to give them the confidence to try.

And no-one gets suspended. "We've had kids who come to us after they've had back-to-back, 20-day suspensions, like three of them, so out of school for 60 days, and they just stay home, play video games or whatever." She recalls a mother bursting into tears with relief when Flodine told her on the phone that her son, who had been in a fight with another boy that day, would not be suspended. "We work with them and the parents because we are set up to take the time," Flodine says. "Mainstream, they're not. I don't think they can be. Mainstream people are crazy busy trying to tick all these things on their curriculum. If the kids all behave well, that might be doable but it's not a perfect world."

Arethusa is a Christian organisation and operates three colleges. One at Spring Hill, in inner Brisbane, has a skateboard factory where students make boards and learn about graphic design. Then they get to ride them on site. At the Barambah campus near the Cherbourg Aboriginal community, about 250km north-west of Brisbane, a rodeo academy makes the maths and English sessions more enticing.

The Deception Bay campus is geared for trade skills, with certificates in furnishing, construction and automotive skills. Flodine leads the way to the

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HIGH IDEALS... ARETHUSA STUDENT CAITLIN GLASS, 16, WANTS TO STUDY SOCIAL WORK AND PSYCHOLOGY.

carpentry workshop across the field in the crisp morning air, dodging kangaroo droppings, to find Gryffyn Davis, 14, pondering how to connect the curved legs of his coffee table to the top. He reckons glue, but his instructor, John Hill, says he'll need to cut a loose tenon or dowel it as well.

Davis gives this a lot of thought. It's obviously an important project. Who is the table for? "For my grandma and grandad. They're about to go into a home so I'm just making this so they can take it," he says. Davis couldn't keep up with English and science at his old school. He's doing much better now, he says, and his sights are set on becoming a carpenter. "[This school] gives you a lot of opportunities to get jobs and you still get your Year 12 certificate. And if you want to do a trade, it takes one year off if you've done the whole course."

Caitlin Glass, 16, is making a coffee table as part of her studies, too, but she doesn't want to do a trade. She wants to be a social worker or psychologist. In primary school, she was bright, happy and healthy. Then her parents' marriage started to break down. Glass was 14. Anxiety became her constant companion. She would shake when she got to school and retreat to the bathrooms. At home, she'd hide in her room. She couldn't sleep. She started self-harming, to take her mind off her emotional pain. "The thought of school and facing everyone was just too scary," she says. "And when I did go back, the teachers would pile up the homework

IF YOU'RE NOT HAVING A GOOD DAY, YOU CAN JUST DO BITS OF WORK AND HAVING THAT OPTION HELPS YOU GET THROUGH YOUR WORK QUICKER BECAUSE THE ANXIETY IS NOT AS GREAT.

CAITLIN GLASS, 16

that you missed and it would just make it much worse. So I dropped out about halfway through grade 9."

She tried to home-school herself "because I never wanted to get to 18 and have no education". Her mother found Arethusa and Glass joined in the middle of last year. "I'm just so lucky I found it," she says. "They accommodate you really well and they listen to your actual needs and don't just put you in with everyone else. If you're not having a good day, you can just do bits of work and having that option actually helps you get through your work quicker because you're not as pressured and the anxiety is not as great."

Being at Arethusa has broadened Glass's outlook and helped her realise that many young people face challenges; she is not alone. She remembers watching happy families on television and feeling like an outcast. "Why isn't my life like that?" she'd lament. "But all the people here have their own story, so you can really relate to them. No-one's from a perfect family. Being around all the different types of people and their personalities, it's made me more interested in learning about people."

Enter her interest in social work and psychology. To get there, Glass will need to sit a Special Tertiary Admittance Test because Arethusa is not an OP-based school. Glass says she'll be ready. "Everything's settling down and life is on the incline," she says. "I'd like to be able to help other people. To help just a couple of people would mean a lot.

"Because I know how much it means." ●