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# Youth mentor lights path

LIFE hasn't always been an easy road for Mt Nasura resident Preston Culbong but in the face of adversity he has pushed on to show that resilience and determination can lead to great things. WA YOUNG person of the year Preston Culbong (22) was once told he'd never amount to anything in life.



Picture: Jon Hewson

www.communitypix.com.au d447487

While he was at primary school, teachers dismissed him as an underachieving student who couldn't read, write or speak properly.

"I ended up teaching myself how to read and write when I was at high school," he said.

"When you have teachers saying you can't read and write you do start to believe it and it does wear you down, but then I got to the point where I wanted to prove them wrong."

Today, Mr Culbong couldn't be any further from the person that certain teachers pegged him to be.

The Curtin University student and youth mentor for Save the Children is considered an outstanding role model to community members and young recidivist offenders.

He draws on his past experience to help others who may not have got off to the best start in life and shows them you don't need to be defined by your past.

"I went through a bit of trouble growing up," he said. "I grew up all over the place. I went to five different primary schools, but once I got to high school – Willetton Senior High – my mum said I was going to stay there."

Mr Culbong's talent began to emerge while he was at high school.

In Year 10, he started a school-based Institute of Technical Education (ITE) traineeship and worked at a bank part time while he continued to study and play state level basketball and football.

But, during his last year of high school, Mr Culbong broke his leg and was no longer able to play sport.

He fell into a depression and started drinking heavily. Members of his family also were affected by mental health issues, illness and homelessness.

"I would talk back to teachers and say 'you don't understand'. I finished high school and took a gap year because I had nothing else going for me at the time.

"I carried on drinking, but one day my brother shook me and said 'you have to snap out of this – it isn't you'."

Although Mr Culbong's home life wasn't always stable, his mum and his pop installed a strong sense of community in him and the need to help others and also to help yourself.

"There were days when we had very little money and we relied on food hampers, but there was always an aunty or uncle who needed help more than us. We'd always have family members and community members staying with us.

"My pop (Len Culbong) was well known in WA for his work on indigenous rights and helping people in the community."

Despite the sometimes testing circumstances, Mr Culbong said he never believed society or anyone owed him.

He said it was up to the individual to create their future: the message he communicates to young, troubled men.

"My goal in life is to work myself out of a job, so young people say to me they don't need me anymore. It's all about empowering these young people; a lot of them don't know how to engage at school or with the community.

"I was told by mum to never let anyone tell you that you can't do something and that's the message I want to spread."

Mr Culbong would like to set up training facilities where young people can learn new skills and gain qualifications.



Next year, he will be in a position to fulfil a life goal and buy his first home.

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