

Your First...first day as a mature student

Rose speaks to Debbie, an occupational therapist, about her first experience as a mature student.

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Rose [01:00:01]

Welcome back to another episode of your First of Everything. Today I'm joined by Debbie, who is an occupational therapist in the community. She's going to talk to us about her first experience as a 52 year old going to study A-levels and then going into university to become an occupational therapist. Hi, Debbie. How are you?

Debbie [01:00:23]

Hello, Rose. I'm fine, thank you.

Rose [01:00:25]

I think it's really, really important that you've put in there your age. I think that was something that you really wanted that to be known. And to be honest with you, that's a part of your brief that you've popped in here. So tell me, tell me about your first experience of going in on your very first day to study to be an occupational therapist.

Debbie [01:00:45]

Well, it was quite it was quite interesting because when I phoned up the college to find out about doing a course, they said, Well, the course has already started, so really you need to join next year. And I said, Yes, but I'm already 51 and I don't want to be 52. Don't be any older in any way that I could start. And she said, Well, if you come in now, like today, now for a meeting with me and haven't have an interview and I will decide whether or not you can join this year's course. So I said, Oh, well, I'm coaching swimming tonight. And she said, Well, it's up to you. You can either come in now or wait till next year. So I went in and had a quick interview and she said, okay, yes, you can start. So you start tomorrow. And I was like, So I just said, she'll be doing biology, psychology and human growth and development. So well, I didn't even do them for O-levels, which is what they were called. And I was at school. So and when I rocked up on the first day into biology, I totally had I never hadn't taken biology for O-level. They are also a month into all the work, into the module, you know, And it was like it was I sitting in a class of a foreign language that I couldn't understand. So it was a bit stressful.

Rose [01:02:03]

I can imagine that sounds like it was very much a Here's your interview and now, now you've got to start like literally the day after. So that's really brave of you to have stepped into that. So what what made you decide to go back and become an occupational therapist?

Debbie [01:02:21]

well, I did. I worked as a police officer in London for 15 years until I had my second child. And then I took a career break and then retired from the police. And then when my children were little, I did something. I wanted to work. I wanted to do something which was be conducive to still spending time with them, but also working around school hours. So I qualified as a swimming teacher and a swimming coach. and I did that and also a lifeguard and I did that for 16 years whilst my children were growing up. And so they came to the pool with me and I went with them to competitions and things like that. When they started swimming competitively, when my older son went to university, in 2016 and my younger son didn't want for so many more after a year, I thought, I don't want to carry on doing this. It really served a purpose and I did enjoy it. But now my children weren't doing it. I thought, it's time for me to do something else and I wanted to do something that I was kind of giving something back to the community, help, you know, helping and supporting people. But because I didn't have any A-levels, I didn't have a degree, I didn't know what I could do. So I spoke to my sister, who's a GP with her own practice, and I spoke to my brother in law and he said, Oh, do you know, do you know any nurses? And I said, Yes. He said, Well, you could always be a health care assistant. Go and speak to your friend who is a nurse and they'll tell you about it. So I went to speak to my friend who's a nurse who lives locally, and she said, Oh, no, you don't want to do that. She said, You want to be a nurse. And I said, Oh, but I don't have a degree. She said, Oh, that's fine. They just want bums on seats. Just just get yourself off to union. I said, I haven't got any A-levels. And she said, Well, just go to college then. So I went to I enrolled at college, as I said, and also went to an open day. So initially I thought I wanted to do nursing, but I went to an open day. I decided nursing wasn't for me. I thought no good if I was a lot younger. But no, I don't want to be doing that in my 50s. And then I thought about occupational therapy after speaking to my older sister, who's an OT and also some mature student at the college. And I thought, yes, what's that? What's the role? For me.

Rose [01:04:31]

I think that that's a really unique story. And from your perspective, with all of the experience that you've already got, you know, working in the police force and everything else, that that's absolutely fantastic that you are where you're at now that you chose to. Actually, this is what I want to do and this is what I want to do with my career. Did you face any challenges along the way?

Debbie [01:04:54]

Yes. I think one thing you notice when you get older is that especially when you've had children, your memory is just not as good. So there were literally times when I was doing my degree when and I learnt from bitter experience. So for example, one time I wrote my introduction for, for a module for an essay, and then the next day I went back, had forgotten that I had written that and did it again. And then I realised I had two and it had taken me hours. So after that I have a little book on my desk

that's on the front. It said TNT, which means the next thing. And so whenever I'd finished, every day I would write down what I'd done and the next thing I needed to do and why. So I could open that book and look at it. Right? I did that yesterday. I don't need to go and repeat that and I need to move on to this.

Rose [01:05:47]

I think that's a really good little, little thing to have, though, to be honest with you, to have a little book of the TNT on the front. I think that would work for a lot of students in in writing assignments and everything else that the next thing I really like that I think that's a very good way of working. And so you've taught me something there as well. When was the moment of realisation that you went, This is it, I've done it, This is where I'm at.

Debbie [01:06:15]

It was after I had some support from a mature student workshop. What are we call her? she worked the university, and her job was to support so mature students in, like, an academic workshop for mature students doing essays. And, I didn't do very well in my first essay. In fact, I did. I did pass, but it was absolute blood, sweat and tears. And yet I didn't do very well. And I thought, I've put more than everything into this and I've only just passed it. I can't do this for three years. It's too stressful. I'll have a nervous breakdown or a heart attack or stroke or all three. And I thought and I actually thought, I can't, I can't do this. It was causing so much anxiety. And I thought, I've just got I've either got to get some help or I've got to give up. And I was really close to just quitting cause I thought, I can't do I can't work like this for three years. So I went on the Academic Skills course. and the first session I went to is like a new lunch hour. There was the room was full. I think it was the only everybody else was nurses, about 25 people there and she was really good. And then the second time, the second week I went, there were like five people there. And the next time I went there was just me. So I had some one to ones with her and she just she taught me how to. Write essays. And it was very simple, but like the TNT thing, very simple. But she taught me how to plan and how to write essays. And so the next she did, I followed her plan back to the letter. Not only was it not stressful writing that essay because I felt like I was in control of what I was doing, I knew how to answer what I was being asked. And so my next essay, I got 90%. And it wasn't because I got super clever, because I'm not super clever, I'm very practical person is just because somebody showed me how to do it. And I was so thankful to her. And once I did that, I thought, I can do this. This is what I really want to do.

Rose [01:08:25]

Yeah, that's amazing. That's. That's really, really good that you found that support mechanism there and that helped you with your next steps. Is there any advice that you would give to anybody that maybe would have been in a similar situation to you? I was thinking about going to university but was unsure.

Debbie [01:08:43]

I think one thing I would say is if you want to go to university to study something, whatever it is you want to study, find somebody who's either studied that or who is studying that, or go to an open day or speak to the university and speak to somebody about that and about what you've been thinking of and what you want to do. Because that's what I did. And I think the thing is, what you have to remember is

you can never be criticised for trying. Lots of people never get out of their armchairs and try. So if you try, the worst thing that can happen is, is that it doesn't work out for you. You decide it's not what you want to do, but at least you tried it. So that's what I would say to anybody who's thinking about going to university, especially if they're a mature student, you really can do it.

Rose [01:09:30]

That's that's really positive. That's really, really lovely. Thank you. What are your future aspirations then?

Debbie [01:09:37]

And I'm really enjoying the job I'm in at the moment. So I've been here for nearly two years. And I'm not the kind of person who always wants to work my way up into more senior position. What I really want to do is to get to know my job role really, really well. So I'm very experienced so that I'm one of the more experienced people on the team and I really want to do my educator's course so that I can mentor and support students and people who are new who've just joined the team. I really enjoy that aspect of working. I have always enjoyed supporting and mentoring other people, so that's what I would really like to be able to do in the future.

Rose [01:10:24]

Well, you've had a really interesting journey and you know you are where you are now and I think that's absolutely fantastic. And I really do wish you all the best in the future.

Debbie [01:10:34]

Thank you, Rose.

Rose [01:10:35]

Thank you for coming today.

Debbie [01:10:38]

Thank you.

Rose [01:10:41]

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