

Paris Te Oka

Looking to the future

When Paris was in high school she admits she wasn't the best student or daughter to her teachers or family.

During that time her parents were going through a separation and she was failing school and was wagging most days. Paris was having a hard time dealing with her home situation and found it wasn't easy to focus at school.

A year after her parents separation, Paris remembers having a big assembly at her school where two kids came in and talked about the Graeme Dingle Foundation and how they went on this really crazy 14 month journey called project K. She says she remembers thinking that doing something like Project K would be quite cool.

"My name got pulled out of this bucket. I was one of 12 students who was able to do this 14 month programme," says Paris.

None of Paris' friends wanted to do the programme with her but she remembers thinking 'yes I can get away from this place for three weeks and not talk to anybody.'

"I was scared because everybody that we were with were either too cool, or I had no idea who they were. I got a bit nervous because this wasn't my crowd but I ended up becoming really good friends with them and ended up becoming an unspoken leader, like a leader but without being told that I was the leader.

"I kind of called the shots and it was really cool to be called that person. I'd never been put in a leadership position before so for that to happen to me I thought it was kind of breath-taking to be honest."

After spending three weeks away, Paris returned to school a completely different person.

"I actually started showing up. I was excited to see these new friends that I had made and I was excited to hang out with them as weird as it was."

After the three weeks away, the next step in the programme was a community challenge.

"We got to learn about different organisations in the Bay of Plenty, it was interesting and was sad at the same time learning about these places. How they really have to push for funding because people cannot afford to get treatment for the heart or cancer."

The group Paris was a part of chose to help out the SPCA and went around to different schools in the Bay of Plenty and talked to them about donating funds that would go towards the animals at the SPCA. Another they got to do was to present speeches in front of the city council.

"I think that was probably one of the most challenging things for us as a group and me as an individual. Speaking in front of people was really difficult, but I've grown to actually really love it."

After that, Paris went through the mentoring stage and was paired up with a lady named Helen.

"She was so amazing because I was able to tell her about my home situation, things that were going on at school and she would take the time out of her day to talk to me about it to make sure that I was okay mentally.



"She would take me out just to get away from the world and she even gave me work experience in her store. She helped me out with my CV so I could get myself my first job. She was the reason I got my first job at 15."

Over the period of 14 months Paris went through a roller-coaster journey while being a part of Project K and came out the other end gaining her NCEA level one.

"I was scared that I wasn't actually going to do it and I ended up in some pretty decent classes because I started showing up for school again.

"Post Project K, I went to Government House to get an excellence award from Dame Patsy Reddy. It was a really crazy experience being in front of politicians and them recognising what I have done through the Graeme Dingle Foundation."

Paris also went to Auckland to receive an award and she says she is really proud of that achievement.

She then went on to becoming a youth ambassador and starting MCing the Project K graduations in Tauranga and the Graeme Dingle Foundation excellence awards where they recognise all the different programme in the Bay of Plenty with the Graeme Dingle Foundation.

Eventually, Paris got a job with the Graeme Dingle Foundation as a Kiwi Can leader.

"Ever since I was 14 the foundation has been a part of my life and even to this day they still helped me a lot, in just achieving my goals and helping me with little things like that.

"I ended up leaving because I felt as if yes I had experience and I could share those with young kids, but I think I had a lot to discover about myself and I still feel as if I do, so I parted way with Kiwi Can but I'm still a part of the Graeme Dingle Foundation."

Paris says it's crazy to see how far she has grown as a person.

"I find myself a lot more confident when I am speaking to people. I never wanted to make eye contact or speak up, but now I'm total capable of doing that.

"I don't think that I would have been able to if it wasn't for the foundation.

"It's crazy with the opportunities that they allow if you want something they'll make it happen. If you've got a goal they will push you and help you open up doors.

"They don't do it for you but they push you in the right direction where those doors just open up for you."

We want every child to know: What they have inside is greater than any obstacle.