

'Education saved my life': Valleys mum wins award after overcoming troubled past

After being placed in a women's refuge, 33-year-old mother-of-three Laura Harris moved to Aberdare, Rhondda Cynon Taff. She knew no-one in the area so decided to enrol in college at Coleg y Cymoedd and began her learning journey in 2015.

Laura started with an Access to Humanities course and progressed onto Level 3 Business & Administration. Determined to succeed, Laura excelled at her studies, achieving distinctions in her coursework.

Laura has received the Overall Learner of the Year as well as the Health and Wellbeing category at this year's Inspire! Awards in recognition of her transformation into a confident and successful student progressing to university, having secured a place to study events management at the University of South Wales in September.

Mum to Tyler, 15, and 10-year-old twin girls, Laura said:

"I had a troubled childhood. I didn't go to school and had a difficult relationship with my mother. It was no surprise when I was made homeless and ended up walking the streets of Swansea trying to find shelter at 14 years old.

"I used drugs to escape from my life but they made me psychotic and frightened. I got pregnant at 17 and was given my own property and came off drugs and started to turn my life around. I met my partner and all was alright until he became controlling.

"I was placed in a women's refuge and was transferred to Aberdare, an area where I knew no-one but I was safe. I wanted to get an education to help my son with his school work. I began at Coleg y Cymoedd and have never looked back.

"I relish learning and nothing feels more rewarding than the pride I feel achieving distinctions in my work. I have been accepted to university next academic year which is something I thought I would never ever do."

The Inspire! Awards are hosted each year ahead of Adult Learners' Week to celebrate the achievements of outstanding learners in Wales who have shown exceptional passion, commitment and drive for learning; often in the face of difficult circumstances, as well as employers who champion learning in the workplace.

Organised by Learning and Work Institute Wales with the financial backing of the Welsh Government and the European Social Fund, this year's Adult Learners' Week runs from 19–25 June and celebrates lifelong learning; whether work-based, as part of a community education course, at college, university or online.

Now celebrating its 26th year, it aims to promote the range of courses available to adult learners; from computing and childcare to business and languages.

Laura has used her challenging background to help others. As a result of the trauma of her past life, Laura suffers panic attacks. As part of a theatre workshop Laura devised a DVD which features her experiences on relationships and domestic violence. The DVD was rolled out across schools and colleges in Rhondda Cynon Taff and won a National Union of Students Enterprise award in 2016.

Laura Wilson, welfare officer at Coleg y Cymoedd, nominated Laura for the Inspire! Awards. She says:

“Laura is definitely inspiring others through her youth work. Laura sees the college as her family. It's such a small and friendly campus, she's got to know lots of people here and that's helped increase her confidence.”

Laura Harris adds:

“My message to anyone who suffers from mental health, alcohol and drug problems like I did is that the answer is education. It has transformed my life and that feels amazing.”

“My mum has come back into my life. She's really proud of me. She's amazed by the transformation in me and I now feel complete.”

“I'm overwhelmed at winning this award, I'm excited and I'm proud. I've proved to myself and others that I can do it.”

Commenting on the Inspire! Awards, Minister for Skills and Science, Julie James, said:

“Laura's story captures the true spirit of the Inspire! Awards, proving how empowering education can be, no matter your age or background. It is learners like her that provide an excellent example for others, overcoming the obstacles and difficulties in their own lives to inspire potential adult learners across Wales. I would like to congratulate her and all the other winners on their outstanding achievements.”

“We hope that Adult Learners’ Week will encourage adults to find out more about improving their skills and enhancing their career options by taking part in the range of free events happening across Wales. Adults can also access the Skills Gateway to get careers advice and guidance, whether they want to improve their skills and employability, access training, or get back into work.”

David Hagendyk, Director of Learning and Work Institute Wales, said:

“The Inspire! Awards show how learning can really change lives. We hope people feel empowered by the winners’ stories and make the most of Adult Learners’ Week to get involved in local opportunities and seize the moment – whether you are stuck in a rut, want to make a change or brush up on your skills, Adult Learners’ Week could be just the boost you need to help improve your current situation through learning.”

Other winners include Arthur J Gallagher, who won the Small Employer category, Stuart Hughes, who won the Into Work category, Nina Miklaszewicz, winner of the Progression category, Nutica Neascu, winner of the Family Learning Individual category, Jimama Ansumana, winner of the Young Adult category, Christopher Joyce, winner of the Life or Career Change Category, Ceredigion Council, winner of the Large Business category, Treorchy Primary, winner of the Family Learning Project category, and 3Gs Only Men Allowed, winners of the Community Project category.

For more information on Adult Learners’ Week, go to the Welsh Government’s [Skills Gateway for Adults](#) (external link), call 0800 028 4844 or follow @skillsgatewaycw.