



Believe in *Me!*

Inspirational stories
from OCTEC's SavvyParents Program



ParentsNext



OCTEC LIMITED



ParentsNext and OCTEC Savvy Parents

Commencing in July 2018, ParentsNext is an Australian Government program designed to assist parents with young children to identify their education and employment goals. ParentsNext providers help parents gain confidence, develop skills that are right for them and achieve their goals, including the opportunity to engage in paid work when the time becomes right.

In May 2023, the government announced the cessation of ParentsNext as a compulsory program for eligible parents, to be replaced by a voluntary service in the lead up to a new pre-employment program for parents, due to commence in November 2024. In response to these changes, OCTEC commenced our Savvy Parents service in June 2023. This voluntary program offers positive and aspirational goal-driven approaches to pre-employment assistance for parents of young children.

About OCTEC

OCTEC Limited is a not-for-profit community organisation providing high quality employment, training, advocacy and youth services from more than 270 service locations. We provide services to all clients regardless of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, religious belief, marital status or disability. We actively seek to understand our clients, including the needs of jobseekers, single parents, training participants, disadvantaged or isolated community members, community organisations, government agencies and local businesses. We are flexible in the delivery of our services, enabling us to meet the changing needs of all we serve.

*Working to
provide training,
find employment
and support
people in need*





Believe in Me – Stories from OCTEC Savvy Parents

OCTEC has been a major and enthusiastic provider of ParentsNext since the program first began. Through our delivery of ParentsNext we've been able to directly invest in a previously under-served cohort – disadvantaged parents. Because of ParentsNext, and now OCTEC Savvy Parents, we are building the work readiness of more than 7,000 parents facing personal and financial challenges.



Believe in Me is a companion edition to our 2020 booklet, *The Power of Me – Stories from the ParentsNext Program*. It provides an opportunity for our participants to tell their own story of how participation in ParentNext, and now OCTEC Savvy Parents, is enabling them to engage, or reengage with employment or education in ways that would not have been possible without OCTEC's assistance.

This booklet is also an opportunity to revisit some of the participants featured in *The Power of Me*, to hear how they are progressing and to examine how participation in our positive parent services changed their lives in the longer-term.

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OCTEC CEO

It is my pleasure to present to you, *Believe in Me* – *Stories from OCTEC Savvy Parents*.

Over the past 47 years, OCTEC Limited has been building communities by assisting people on a journey to employment.

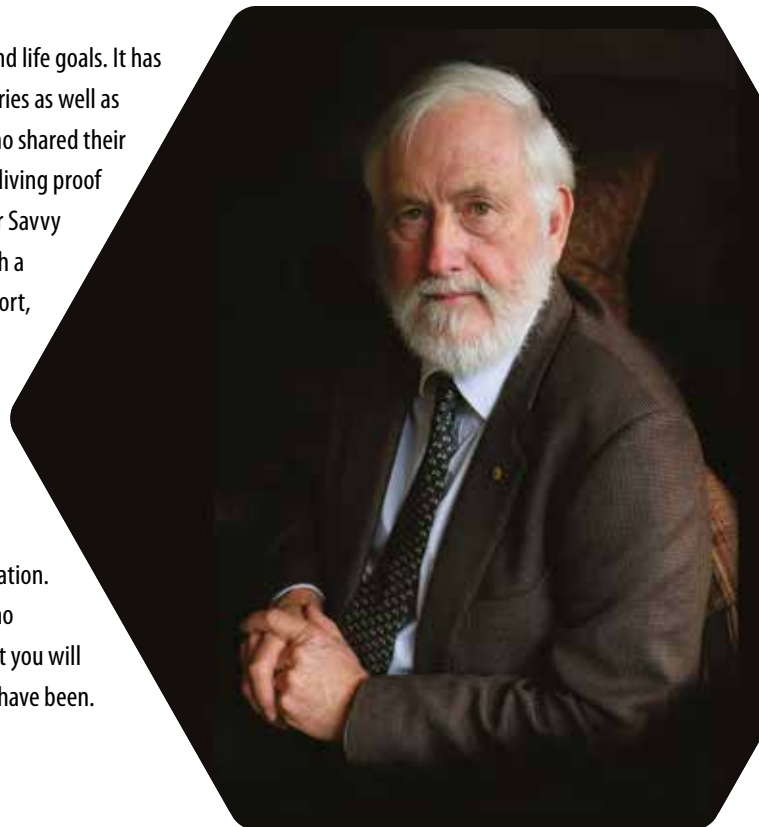
We are not-for-profit, and our goal is to provide vocational education, training and employment assistance to individuals and employers in the communities where we operate. Since 2018, ParentsNext has been an important part of our program mix.

As one of the largest providers of ParentsNext, and now through our Savvy Parents service, we assist a caseload of more than 7,000 parents across New South Wales and Queensland. More than 95% of these participants are women, and we work with them to overcome both personal and financial barriers, and in time helping them

achieve education, employment and life goals. It has been inspiring to read the new stories as well as hear updates from participants who shared their stories with us previously. You are living proof of the transformative nature of our Savvy Parents approach, and of how, with a little self-belief and the right support, lives can be transformed.

I would like to thank our Program Manager, Charissa Mossop, and her hard-working team, for their dedication, commitment, flexibility and innovation. And special thanks to everyone who shared their journey with us. I trust you will be as inspired by these stories as I have been.

Andrew McDougall OAM
CEO OCTEC Limited





OCTEC Program Manager

In 2020, OCTEC produced *The Power of Me – Stories from the ParentsNext Program*. It was an opportunity for program participants to share their stories of how ParentsNext and OCTEC enabled them to develop new skills and connect or reconnect with employment, while also maintaining their parental

responsibilities. Today, more than three years later, and more than five years after we first began delivering ParentsNext, OCTEC's passion for helping disadvantaged parents is as strong as ever. Through our OCTEC Savvy Parents services, we continue to help parents improve their work-related skills, build confidence and realise their goals.

From 82 sites in 10 Employment Regions, our teams work proactively with each participant, providing assistance specifically tailored to their needs, and aligned with their goals. We connect participants with specialist support, including connection to local child care centres, and encourage them to play a part in the enhancement of future program delivery by participating in our Parents Advisory Groups.

OCTEC is committed to closing the gender pay gap. Around 95% of parents who receive our assistance are women, and most have

spent considerable time away from the paid workforce. This causes disconnection from the world of work, undermining confidence, limiting options, and reducing earning capacity. By enabling these women to achieve their goals, OCTEC is directly, and successfully, overcoming this significant barrier. It has been wonderful to hear again from some of the contributors to *The Power of Me* booklet, and to see how their participation in ParentsNext was the catalyst for some amazing changes in their lives, and the lives of their families.

Please enjoy these stories of transformation and self-belief. They are examples of the achievements that our staff and participants experience every day, and of how OCTEC is positively contributing to the lives of thousands of disadvantaged parents every year, through our Savvy Parents approach.

Charissa Mossop

National Manager OCTEC Savvy Parents

A Soaring Career

Natalie

I previously shared my story with you back in 2020. Abandoned by my partner when our son was only one month old, I was forced to give up my career as an environmental scientist. I relocated to Western Sydney and was referred to OCTEC ParentsNext. It was a bit strange to be doing a government program, after all, I was university educated. However, I'm really glad I did.

Working with Cheryl, my OCTEC Consultant, I was able to commence looking for a job, and she also helped me find an appropriate early learning place for my son.

*“ParentsNext
and OCTEC
turned my
life around.”*





“I travel around Australia and surrounding islands, conducting ecological surveys and collecting data.”

Only a few months after starting with OCTEC, I was able to secure a great position as an ecologist with a company in Wagga Wagga. Cheryl provided me with relocation advice, arranged for bond assistance for my new home and OCTEC even paid my bond. I will never forget Cheryl's kindness and generosity, nor the assistance I received from OCTEC.

Since that time, my career has soared. I stayed in Wagga Wagga for seven months and was then offered a Senior Environmental Scientist role with a company in Cairns. It was an amazing opportunity.

My company is really supportive of parents and they allow me the flexibility to complete my work, while also

providing schooling for my son, who is about to start Year 3 and doing really well!

Having this flexibility, I have also been able to start my own organisation – Daintree to Bamaga Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Inc. I'm currently awaiting government permits to allow me to care for specialised threatened species. And I'm not stopping here. My goal now is to seek out a suitable professor to support my research into avian (bird) diseases.

I plan to commence my PhD program in 2024, looking at causes, impact and treatment of *Psittacine Circovirus* (Avian Beak and Feather Disease), which is killing so many beautiful Australian parrots.

Giving Something Back

Kym

I first came to OCTEC ParentsNext in Casino in the Northern Rivers region of NSW back in May 2019. I'm a proud First Australian and mum of two girls. I've also had battles with chronic health issues. **I really wanted to work in the local Aboriginal community, and give something back.** However, I didn't have any formal qualifications, and I wasn't sure how to go about it.

With the help of OCTEC, I started to investigate potential study options. My Consultant, Margaret, helped me to enrol in a Certificate III in Aboriginal / Torres Strait Islander Primary Health. OCTEC purchased a laptop to help me complete this course, and fuel vouchers to help pay for travel to work placement locations. I completed the Certificate III course and then went on to

complete the Certificate IV in Aboriginal Primary Health course. When times were tough, especially during COVID lockdown, when I was at home with my kids, it was good to have contact with my Consultant for support and encouragement.

As part of my course, I completed a work placement at a local Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) and this placement led to the offer of paid work. Then, as a direct result of the experience I had through AMS, I was offered a role with a local Aboriginal Health Service as an Aboriginal Family Support Worker.

OCTEC helped me to accomplish my studies and then secure a fulltime job in my Indigenous community. And, although I've exited the program, I am still involved with OCTEC Savvy Parents, taking part in Parent Advisory Groups, as well as promoting OCTEC to young First Australian mums, who I meet through my job.



A Fresh Start

Shona

It's hard to begin again, in a new state, and especially when you have a large family to care for. I'd recently moved to Queensland. I was a single mum with five kids, including three-year-old twins. **I wanted to make a fresh start.**

I was referred to OCTEC ParentsNext service in Burpengary. Because I had a large family, I was offered an exemption from the program, but I said no. **I really wanted to get some skills. And I wanted to get myself ready for a job.**

Working with my OCTEC Consultant, Nicole, I thought something outdoors would suit me and we agreed I should do some training so I could gain some relevant skills and qualifications. I really wasn't sure how I could pay for training, but I wanted to start something as soon as I could.

Thanks to OCTEC, I was enrolled into a Certificate II course in Resource and Infrastructure Work Preparation.

This was a good course for me, as it would give me a qualification to start work in quite a few industries. I was pretty nervous about studying. How was I going to meet deadlines and do the study when I had my kids to care for? But I was really determined to do both – complete my study and care for my kids.

Whenever I felt like it was all getting too much, I would contact Nicole and we would talk through the issues. **Working with OCTEC helped to keep me focused on the goal.** I'm really hopeful that, once I finish, I will be working soon.

I want to say thank you to OCTEC and Nicole for the constant support. With their help, I'm looking forward to gaining my First Aid and CPR certificates, and then a forklift licence to help improve my employment chances even more.



“Working with OCTEC helped to keep me focused on the goal.”

Supporting My Journey

Shannen



When I first went to OCTEC on the NSW Central Coast, I was a single mum of two children.

I was separated from my family and had no support. I had career goals, but no idea of how to move forward. I was depressed, because I wasn't working or studying. I didn't feel like I was busy enough.

When I started with OCTEC, I met with Consultant, Nahria, and we started speaking about what I wanted to do with my life. I'd considered so many careers, from working for Corrective Services to a job as a beauty therapist. Nahria helped me get on a waiting list for a beauty therapist course. And that was just the beginning!

With the support of OCTEC, things really started happening. I found a part-time job as an RSA marshal and OCTEC helped me enrol in a course to get my forklift ticket. It wasn't long before I was working three jobs - in manufacturing, at a production business, and my RSA marshal role. OCTEC paid for work and safety clothing, which I was able to use in my three jobs. With an offer of full-time work likely, I chose to stay in the manufacturing role, while still doing shifts as an RSA marshal. And in June 2023, I finished the parents' program with OCTEC and Nahria.

During my time with OCTEC I gained the knowledge and skills needed for me to be able to enter the industry I wanted, and I was supported in my journey. I gained confidence in my skills and was able to build upon them.

Work and Life

Aijal

I'm a proud First Australian and the father of two young daughters. I had been working as a scaffolder, but there were problems. The work took a real toll on my physical health. I would get home at the end of the day, totally exhausted and I couldn't give proper support to my girls.

I really wanted to find a better work-life balance that would allow me to support my daughters. I wanted to start to save some money, so one day I could buy a home for my family.

I went to OCTEC's parents' service in Maclean. Michelle, my Consultant, took the time to listen to what I had to say. We both agreed I should stay in construction, as this was a sector I knew, but in a role that was easier for me to manage. Traffic control was one solution.

Michelle helped me to enrol in a Traffic Control course with a local training company in Grafton. The course was paid for by the NSW Government, so it didn't cost me a cent! I completed the course, which included a practical placement out on site, and I was then offered a place in a Workers on Foot course to ensure I was ready to get out there. OCTEC even paid for PPE, work wear and safety boots, to ensure I was ready for a job.

Working with OCTEC, I discovered I could change jobs, but stay in an industry I knew. They helped me get the right qualifications and certificates. **My confidence is growing, because I know that now I have a real shot at getting a more suitable job.**





“My time with OCTEC has been amazing!”

A Matter of Balance

Sheridan

I hadn't worked since the days of high school. I was a mum of two. **I didn't know anything about employment services for people like me**, but I went along to the OCTEC's parents' service in Ipswich.

After only a couple of appointments with Jessica, my OCTEC Consultant, I started to feel more confident about where this journey would lead. Jessica and I talked about my goals and interests, and we shared different career options. I really wanted to work with people. But I needed some skills and qualifications to help make that happen.

Jessica helped me to enrol into a First Aid course, to complete an NDIS check, a Blue Card (working with children) and a Police Check. We discussed different training options and Jessica helped me to enrol in a Certificate III

in Individual Support. Not only that, Jessica also helped me to write a résumé. We agreed I needed some work experience, so Jessica helped me to secure a casual position at McDonalds.

With the help of OCTEC, I have been able to balance my work, studies and care of my kids. During the day, while I study, my children are in day care, and I arrange my rosters to work nights and on weekends when my family can look after the kids.

My time with OCTEC has been amazing! Without the help of their program, and the amazing Jessica, I wouldn't have been able to have the knowledge, life skills and understanding I have today. Thank you, Jessica, for all your hard work, and to OCTEC for some amazing support.

Goals and Steps

Jin Hee

I love being a mum, but I also want to provide the best life for my family, and I knew I could only do that by building a career. But how to go about it? And what kind of career did I want to pursue? I would hesitate and procrastinate on these questions, and nothing changed.

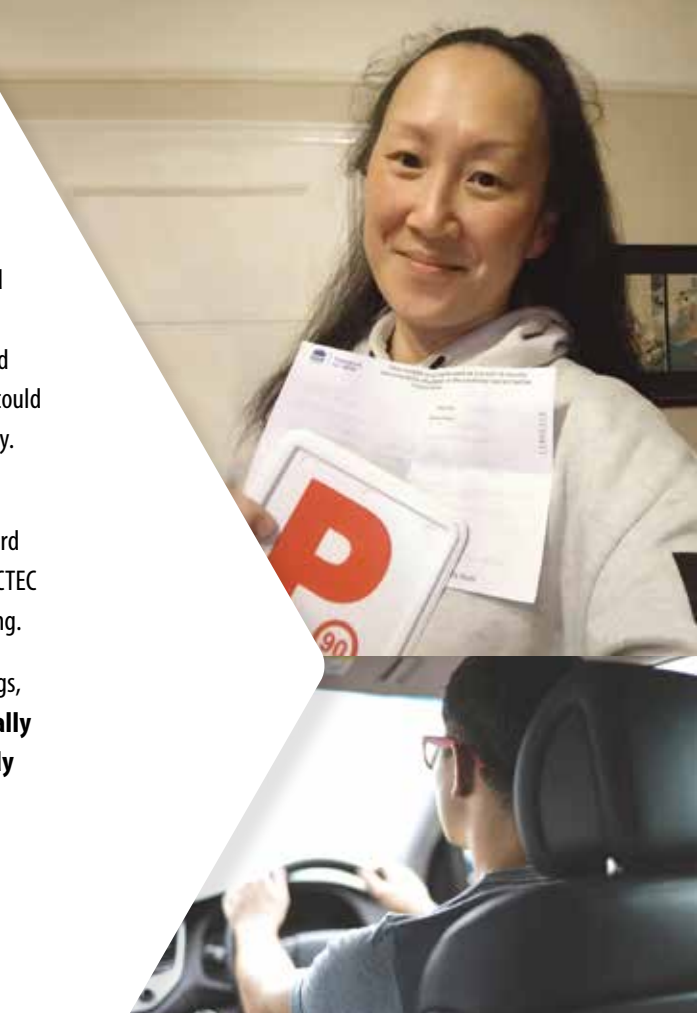
Then I went to OCTEC in Chatswood, and I met my Consultant, Robyn. We spoke about my goals, how to prioritise those goals, and how to set out achieving them. Robyn told me that the best way to achieve the biggest goals is to take small positive steps towards them. So, together, we set out a list of goals, and some steps I needed to achieve to help make them happen.

One of the first things we agreed I needed was a driver's licence. If I could drive, I could

gain more independence and flexibility. Robyn also suggested I obtain a First Aid certificate, as this was something many employers were looking for, and it would also help me feel more confident that I could help my children in a medical emergency.

Robyn used funds from OCTEC and the program to pay for driving lessons, hazard perception tests, and my driving test. OCTEC also paid for my First Aid and CPR training.

I'm starting to follow through with things, instead of procrastinating. **I'm now really hopeful that I can achieve my study and career goals, all with the help of OCTEC.**



Confidence in Myself

Sreydeth

I am a single mum caring for three children. When I first came to Australia, I was helpless and trying to make ends meet. At that time, **I just wanted to learn English, so that I could communicate with other people. I had no skills or motivation to do any job. I needed confidence in myself.**

I came to OCTEC's parents' service in Bankstown about a year ago, and there I met with Maheen, and Maheen became my Consultant. Maheen spoke to me about work. She helped and encouraged me to understand I could work in school time, so that I could earn money and take care of my children. But we both knew that I needed English lessons, so Maheen helped me to get into English classes at TAFE.

Maheen and OCTEC give me so much. With better English, I want to work in my community, and

Maheen helped me to do a community service course. When my family struggled with costs, Maheen asked Food Pantry to give us help. OCTEC paid for my courses and any checks that I needed – like a Working with Children Check. This was very helpful financially. When I was down, Maheen helped me with counselling, which helped me grow my confidence.

Now that my life is getting better, Maheen and I are working towards applying for jobs. She is helping me with emails and filling out application forms. With the support of OCTEC and Maheen, I know that I will get myself a good job very soon.



A Humbling Experience

Catherine

I'm an OCTEC Savvy Parent Consultant in the Brisbane suburb of Chermside. **Working with disadvantaged parents and helping them on a pathway to a career, can be really challenging at times. It can also be incredibly rewarding.**

The case of one amazing mum really stands out for me. When Ebony was first referred to OCTEC she was facing some incredible challenges.

Estranged from her three kids, she had survived cancer, had been battling addiction, and had been a victim of domestic violence. We spoke several times on the phone. Ebony seemed very shy, and her self-esteem was so low.

When she finally came in for her first face-to-face appointment, I was surprised to discover that Ebony had found herself a job. However, she was still very worried. She wanted to reconnect with her kids. I was concerned that she wouldn't

be able to keep her job, so I spent time with Ebony, asking her some important questions as part of a post placement support assessment. We spoke about her past. I asked her what she wanted for her future. Ebony was very honest. My questions really got her thinking.

Ebony and I started to develop some coping strategies – things she could do to help herself and, ultimately, help her family. Ebony agreed she needed to trust her instincts, rather than always trying to please others.

Together we considered how her new job could be the first step towards her goal of regaining financial independence. I also made sure Ebony received practical post placement support, such as replacing her mobile phone when it was stolen.



At a recent catch-up, Ebony broke down in tears, thanking me for being there and listening to her story. **She was incredibly grateful to OCTEC for the support she'd received.** I have to tell you ... it was all very humbling.

My First Step

Anonymous

Hello, I am a widow who was born in Syria. When I first came to OCTEC's parents' services in Chatswood, I had not worked for a very long time. **My husband had earned the income for me and our two daughters, but now he was gone, and I was left to provide on my own.** It was tough, because everything has become so expensive.

I met with Robyn, who was the OCTEC Parents Consultant at Chatswood. Robyn and I spoke about what I wanted to do to care for my daughters. I feared my English wasn't good enough, and that I didn't have any qualifications or experience to work in Australia.

Robyn and OCTEC helped me to get some skills. They paid for me to attend an English course at TAFE. OCTEC paid for a computer to help me study. And now, I have started in a Certificate IV in Accounting and Bookkeeping.

Robyn also showed me how to use my contacts to help me find work. Through contacts at my local church, I was offered a casual administration role. **It was the first step in my career!**

Robyn is by my side. She keeps in contact with me, to make sure my course and my job are going okay. And I know I can contact her whenever I need any assistance. Robyn is an amazing lady. She did her best for me, and I am so grateful for her.

"It was the first step in my career!"

Qualified and Ready

Alicia

Since being with OCTEC, I have really stepped out of my comfort zone. **I went from being a stay-at-home mum for 12 years to now being qualified and ready for work.**

I have nearly completed a Certificate III in Aged Care Support. I have a First Aid certificate as well as other work-relevant certificates. I never thought I would be able to do any of this . . . I mean, I was a stay-at-home mum. But, with encouragement from my Consultant, Chandell, and the team at OCTEC in Ipswich, I have done it all!

When I first came to OCTEC, I was determined that it was going to be my year. And now, I'm ready to be a working mum. Throughout the year, Chandell has been there to listen to my worries. She's always had the right word of

encouragement to help me get past any fears. Today, I have the confidence I used to lack. I now realise nothing is out of reach.

Sometimes, all it takes is that extra person to guide you and remind you that you are doing everything required to get to where you want to be! Chandell was that person for me. OCTEC gave me the motivation and support I needed to reach my goals!



“I am now qualified and ready for work”



Celebrating Success

Tamworth single mum Kirsty once said, “setting a goal isn’t all that hard, achieving the goal is the hard part”. And, thanks to OCTEC’s positive Savvy Parents service approach, that’s just what she’s achieved. With OCTEC’s assistance, Kirsty completed a parenting course to assist with her children, and she’s started looking for work placements that lead to a job.



Here are some more amazing parents who, thanks to OCTEC, have achieved their goals. We want to celebrate their successes ...

Amanda is a Brisbane mum to five kids. She needed some skills to get into the workforce. OCTEC paid for a Certificate III in Driving Operations as well as a HR driver's licence. And now she's job-ready. "Don't be afraid to try something different," is Amanda's advice.

Anna had not worked for 11 years, as she had been caring for her young kids. She wanted to re-join the workforce. She wanted to become a qualified swimming instructor. OCTEC Windsor paid for Anna's Austswim course and First Aid training. She's now a qualified swimming instructor and pool deck supervisor.

Zara came to OCTEC in Nerang; a young mum with no qualifications, nor a driver's licence. Today, thanks to OCTEC, Zara has started driving lessons and enrolled into a TAFE Certificate III in Education Support.

"I now feel confident enough to speak up and talk with people."

Taylor moved from Western Sydney to Kyogle, seeking a better life for her son. OCTEC Consultant Jennifer referred Taylor to a range of different support services to build her confidence and contacts. OCTEC paid for a First Aid course and Taylor has just enrolled in a Certificate III in Early Child Care.

A Grafton mum of three, **Tiffany** struggled with severe anxiety. Working with Margaret from OCTEC, Tiffany gradually improved her confidence. She obtained her L plates and started driving lessons. With Margaret's encouragement, she began making and selling woodwork at local markets. She's now looking at starting her own business. "OCTEC and Margaret gave me back my voice," she said. "I now feel confident enough to speak up and talk with people."

Rebekah was a single mum who moved from Sydney to the Tweed coast. She had a dream of becoming a swimming instructor, and OCTEC's ParentsNext Consultant Kymberley is helping to make that dream come true. OCTEC has paid for a First Aid certificate and is assisting with the costs of an Oz Swim training course at the Laurie Lawrence Swim School in Banora Point.

Cara from Toowoomba came to OCTEC having left school in Year 11 with no qualifications. Despite her original RTO closing down, OCTEC assisted Cara to complete a Certificate III in Community Services, and she's now preparing to enrol in a Certificate IV in Youth Work. Cara's words perhaps best sum up OCTEC's Savvy Parents approach. "Marangu goochu," she says, in the words of the Kalkadoon people of north-west Queensland, "you're part of our mob, we all walk together".

Island Life

Anika

When you live outside of the main city, it can be hard to get the same services as people there receive. I was a mum of two kids, living in Dunwich on North Stradbroke Island. I'm a First Nations woman, with cultural connections to the island. **I wanted to stay on North Stradbroke, caring for my kids and working. OCTEC helped to make these things happen.**

OCTEC offers an outreach of their parents' service to the island. I connected with OCTEC Consultant, Tania, and we spoke about what was happening in my life. Even though I had the support of my family, I had no access to day care for my kids. I'd only stayed at school until Year 10. I had no driver's licence. I'd also experienced some trauma in my life, which impacted my mental health, but I didn't want to go on any medication because I had two kids who needed me.

Tania and I spoke about how I could stay on Stradbroke Island, still look after my kids, and earn some money.

We agreed that a Business Administration course would be a good choice, and Tania told me I could do this online! OCTEC helped me to enrol into a Certificate III in Business Admin. They paid for the course and even bought a laptop for me so I could study online at home.

Studying really improved my self-confidence. And, even better, I was working towards getting a job on the island! Tania helped me look for jobs on Stradbroke, and showed me how to apply for them. And I was successful, securing a job with a local aged care facility.

I love my job. My employer is providing on-the-job training, so I can do a wider variety of tasks. My mental health is improving.

I'm able to enjoy island life, while earning an income and building a future for me and my kids.





Like Family

Michelle

One of the hard things about living in a country town like Dalby is that we don't always have the same services as they have in the city. I'm a single mum and there weren't many day care options for my kids before they started school. But then, I started with OCTEC.

I met with Alana who became my OCTEC Consultant. Alana asked about my situation, but also about what I wanted to do. I'd worked in retail in the past, but didn't want to go back to that. I wanted to help people with my job, but you needed skills and qualifications for that kind of work.

Alana helped me enrol into a Certificate III course in Individual Support with a local training company, while some friends looked after my kids. I had to complete a work placement as part of my course, and my employer was so happy with my attitude and dedication, they offered me a job! OCTEC paid for work clothing and a wage subsidy to help my new employer with costs.

I just love my job. They're like family to me. And it all came about because of OCTEC.

Supporting Regional Communities

Not every OCTEC Savvy Parent participant lives in a metropolitan area, or even in a major regional centre. An important part of our successful approach is implementing strategies to ensure parents in every location we serve receive the same high-quality assistance.

Our Consultants use mobile phones, online video meetings and social media apps to maintain contact with every participant, including providing them with post-placement support. This ensures they are readily contactable whenever each participant requires, no matter where that participant lives.

In addition to online connectivity, our Consultants provide face-to-face outreach services to our participants, travelling to isolated communities to meet with and assist them. These outreach services occur across vast areas of NSW and Queensland. Here are two examples.

St George, Queensland

Situated in the Balonne Shire, more than 500 kilometres west of Brisbane, St George is a town of just over 3,000 people. However, many of our participants live in locations outside of the main town. OCTEC's Darling Down team members travel more than five hours by road from Toowoomba to St George at least monthly, to meet participants and assist them overcome their barriers to employment.

OCTEC participants in St George have specific assistance needs, and our Consultants are available to assist with these needs, enabling parents to achieve their vocational goals. Due to the remote location of the St George area, many parents request assistance with access to vehicles. Parents from outlying towns, such as Dirranbandi, rely heavily on access to a vehicle to be able to attend St George for medical care, groceries and other support



services. OCTEC provides financial assistance that enables parents to register and insure their vehicles and to keep them safely on the road.

A significant number of our St George parents are interested in studying and gaining qualifications. This gives them the ability to compete for and win better paying jobs, sometimes in larger towns, where they find improved access to housing, schools and other support services.

Moree, NSW

In the Shire of Moree Plains, more than 600km north-west of Sydney, Moree has a population of just over 7,000 people, with around 20% of the Shire identifying as First Australians. OCTEC's New England team members travel more than three hours by road from Tamworth to Moree at least fortnightly, to meet with participants and assist them on their pathway to employment.

More than 76% of our Moree parents are First Australians, many of whom face multiple and/or significant barriers to employment. Our team spend time with them, connecting with support services appropriate to their needs, such as culturally-appropriate healthcare, housing services, domestic and family violence counselling and support, and drug and alcohol support. We spend individual time with each parent, building bonds and seeking to

understand each individual's specific needs and aspirations.

To equip our Moree parents with the skills and qualifications they need to compete in the open jobs market, our team assist them to enrol in relevant education and training courses, including those offered through TAFE's Moree campus, and through Community College Northern Inland Inc, which is located in Moree.



Finding My Way

Angela

I'm a single mum of two and I wasn't working. I was determined to get work, but there was always something in my way. I'd left school in Year 10. **I wasn't sure what my goals were. I didn't know what I was going to do.**

Then, in 2019, I started ParentsNext with OCTEC in Murwillumbah. I met with OCTEC Consultant Naomi. In 2020, COVID came along. My son needed specialist care for a heart condition, but it was so hard to get appointments due to COVID. In the end, my boy needed heart surgery.

In 2021, things became worse. I lost two close friends and my grandmother also passed away. I was living with my grandmother and, when her house was sold, I had to find somewhere to live. I kept being knocked back by real estate agents. **I had no job. I was becoming desperate.** What if my family became homeless? All these things started to really affect my mental health. Still, I was determined. **I just needed some support and direction. I'm so grateful I was in ParentsNext. Naomi helped me find my way.**

OCTEC bought a computer for me, so I could study online during lockdowns. Naomi enrolled me in a one-day Introduction to Computer course at a local community college. That course gave me so much confidence. I mean, there were times when I was even helping other students!

Still, the prospect of being homeless hung over my head. Naomi told me getting a job would help me to secure a decent rental property. She helped me with my résumé. OCTEC paid for interview clothes, for police checks, and even to apply for a Birth Certificate when I found I didn't have one. I secured a job as a cleaner, and I'm still working more than a year later!

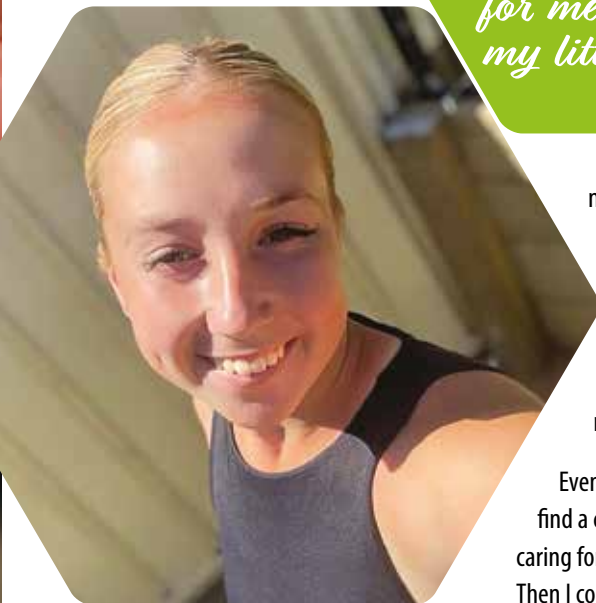
Today, my kids and I are renting a home. I'm working and earning money. I'm already thinking about more training and new opportunities. **I never thought I'd be brave enough to get back into the workforce. Naomi and OCTEC showed me I could.**

Sometimes, things don't work out as you planned. When this happens, I would say change your plans, but not your goals.



"I just needed some support and direction."

“I now have a part-time social worker job that works for me and for my little girl.”



Changing Plans

Maddison

I was supposed to graduate from high school in 2020, but COVID hit and I wasn't able to study properly and I decided not to finish school, but go straight to TAFE and study nursing. I wanted to work with people. I started my TAFE course, but the return of COVID meant I wasn't allowed to do practical placement. This was when I fell pregnant. And I'm now the mum of a gorgeous little girl.

Even though I didn't finish TAFE, I wanted to find a career where I could achieve my goal of caring for people, but also care for my little girl. Then I connected with OCTEC's parents' program in Blacktown and was introduced to my Consultant, Sharlene.

Sharlene and I spent time discussing the type of work I could do. Sharlene helped me write a résumé and prepare myself for life as a working mum. I met the OCTEC recruitment team and we discussed the challenges of juggling motherhood and work. We also discussed job options and I was really interested in a role through the NDIS, and working with people in the local area. **OCTEC helped me step through the job application process and I was offered employment the next week!**

I now have a part-time social worker job that works for me and for my little girl. It's such a rewarding job and I'm loving every bit of it! I can't thank OCTEC enough for helping me to meet my goal, even though my plans had to change.



I'm Tara, and I'm an OCTEC Savvy Parents Consultant on the Gold Coast. I want to share the story of Bernadette – Bernie – and the journey we've shared together. I began working with Bernie in late 2022. Bernie was a single mum to a little boy and, while she'd not planned parenthood, her close relationship with her son was such a beautiful thing to see.

A Special Bond

Tara

We spent some time getting to know each other, allowing me to understand what Bernie wanted to do with her life.

Despite her barriers, including speech impairment, dyslexia and epilepsy, Bernie had some definite goals. With the rising cost of living, she knew she needed stable employment and had her heart set on one day purchasing a house. She had a friend who worked in traffic control, and felt this would be something she'd enjoy.

Bernie and I set out our plans. I booked Bernie into a First Aid course, which was paid for by OCTEC. I assisted Bernie sort out care options for her son, which would allow her to take on shifts at short notice. I assisted Bernie to complete all the relevant training, and to seek out employers in the traffic control sector.

Only one day after she completed her training, Bernie was offered a shift by an employer. Traffic control work can be challenging, working outside and in different locations, often with very little prior notice. With my help, Bernie negotiated suitable times and locations with her employer, who was so impressed with her work, that Bernie was offered ongoing employment.

Bernie once said she liked working with me, because "you don't look down your nose at me".

The two of us really bonded as a team. We've laughed and cried, and working together has been an amazing experience.

A stickler for the rules, and with an eye for detail, Bernie has already been offered a promotion and additional training. Her future looks strong, and she continues to show everyone her potential.

Just Keep Going

*Jane**

Sometimes things don't go as you planned. Sometimes, your goals are impossible to reach. **But, as bad as things may seem, you need to just keep going.**

I came to OCTEC's parents' services in Toowoomba as a survivor of domestic violence. Needing to start again for my kids, I told my Consultant, Alana, that I wanted to be a hairdresser. OCTEC helped me enrol into a Certificate III in Hairdressing at TAFE. They paid for tools and equipment to help me complete this course. And they paid for the registration of my car, to allow me to attend the course.

Then, as I was completing training, my doctors told me I had a Chiari malformation, a brain abnormality which would require surgery. Alana and I revisited my goals,

as I was told I might not be able to stand, or even sit up for long periods after the surgery.

Right throughout the process, Alana stayed in contact with me. Now, my neurosurgeon says I cannot work for the foreseeable future. But Alana has been there to give me help and advice. She assisted me to be transferred onto the Disability Support Pension. And she has promised to keep in contact.

*** Name changed at participant's request.**

Positive Pre-employment Program

Louise

You might remember my story called *A Breath of Fresh Air*, from *The Power of Me* booklet. I came to OCTEC's ParentsNext service in Ipswich in 2018. Back then, my life was something of a mess. **I had a rough idea of what I wanted to do, but no idea of how to get started.**

Working with OCTEC Consultant, Brittany, I was given the chance to complete both a Certificate III in Business Administration and a Certificate IV in Health Administration. The OCTEC program, and these training courses, came along at the right time for me. **I felt OCTEC set me up for a great career.**

After leaving OCTEC, I worked in a private hospital for almost a year. But then, due to the impact of COVID and health complications, I had

to leave the sector. I always loved ParentsNext, and OCTEC, they gave me the confidence to succeed. I mean, the confidence was always there, but it was Brittany who helped me find it. I know there has been some stigma and negativity around the ParentsNext program, but I know first-hand the benefits a positive approach can provide. OCTEC showed me this.

After leaving the health sector, things went full circle and I began working for another provider as a ParentsNext Consultant. This was something I wanted to do after being with OCTEC. **I know how much a positive pre-employment program can help parents like me.** And I know that being a single mum, well, you always have a fear of failing, and not just failing



yourself, but also your children. Because of OCTEC, I was able to overcome this.

Five years later, I'm working in my dream job and my child is doing well in school. I know she is happy and proud of me. And, at the end of the day, I did all of this for her.

Willing to Serve

Gliceria

There were so many things going against me when I first came to OCTEC. I had grown up in the Philippines and all my family were still there. I was shy. I had no confidence. I could speak English, but I didn't think it was good enough. I was married with two kids. My husband had many health problems and my youngest child also was struggling. My focus was helping my family.

I had previously completed a Certificate III in Aged Care, but I did not like this work. I didn't have a driving licence. I really didn't have any idea what work I would do. In 2019, I started working with OCTEC ParentsNext in Murwillumbah, and Consultant Naomi. Naomi referred me to a ladies group at the local

community centre. I started to make connections. And I could feel my confidence growing.

In 2020, my family decided to move out of town because we were worried about COVID and the effect on my husband's health. This was also not good, because spraying at the local orchards gave my husband allergic reactions. Meanwhile, rents were growing and we could not afford to move back into town.

Throughout this time, Naomi was wonderful. We kept speaking about work and study. I decided that I wanted to do early learning education. We moved into a caravan park in town so I was close to the TAFE. Naomi helped us connect with the

Housing Department. She also connected us to a program which helped people registered for housing to study and find work. With all this support, I received a computer and study equipment. Naomi helped us connect to the NDIS to get more help for my youngest child. And, in 2021, I finished my study and found a job!

I want to say thank you to OCTEC for help in the difficult times. Every time I come into their office, they are willing to serve. They listen to your story. I hope more parents like me get help through OCTEC's parents' program.

"They listen to your story."



Believing in Me

Neda

I am so grateful to OCTEC in Windsor, and to my Consultant, Cheryl.

I can remember when I first started with OCTEC. I had completed qualifications in software engineering in Iran, but I didn't have enough confidence to find a job and I was struggling to support my family with a low income. **It really felt like no one believed in me.**

Cheryl, she gave me the best advice. We agreed that I needed to improve my English, and to get qualifications that were recognised in Australia. I began studies at TAFE, improving my English and securing a Certificate III in Information Technology. Cheryl suggested I should also get some work experience, and I started volunteering

with non-profit organisations, working as a web designer.

Then, with my qualification completed, with several months experience in the Australian workforce, and with much improved English, I applied with an agency for a full-time IT position. I was accepted! And I have started to work.

Thanks to Cheryl and OCTEC, I started to believe in myself. I was able to find a job, in the industry I enjoyed. Now, I'm earning a good income and supporting my family.

"I started to believe in myself. I was able to find a job in the industry I enjoyed."

So Easy to Quit

Jessica

When I first came to OCTEC in Browns Plains, I had two young kids and little support, as my partner was in gaol. I hadn't worked since my eldest child had been born and I had some previous convictions of my own, which made it hard to get a job. **I really wanted to become financially stable, and to provide for my two girls.**

Mana was my OCTEC Consultant, and she was amazing. When I was feeling down, Mana helped boost my morale. We kept focusing on my goal. We wrote my résumé and sent it out to employers. Mana told me that, if I got rejections from employers, we'd just use these as motivation to keep fighting for a job! When I needed to build up my confidence, I knew I could always stop into the office and see Mana.

Having a criminal history makes it hard to get some jobs. I'd wanted to get into tattooing, or



maybe an apprenticeship as a butcher, but I was getting nowhere. I needed to get some work history behind me. I started volunteering at a local swimming school, but my application for a Blue Card (Working With Children Check) was rejected.

It would have been so easy to quit, had I not been with OCTEC. They paid for a First Aid course, because Mana told me having a qualification would make me more employable.

She was right! Within a week of completing my First Aid course, I secured a job as a cleaner. Mana then helped me to complete a course to get my forklift ticket and I'm now working as a supervisor!

My journey continues. Thanks to OCTEC, I'm building that financial security. And I'm even planning to surprise my daughters with a three-day Disney Magic at Sea cruise.

Care and Support

Natalee

Things were really tough when I first went to OCTEC. I was in an unhealthy and violent relationship. Nahria, my Consultant was great. She helped me focus on my private life, while I left home and resettled my children. Then there were court sessions and custody battles . . .

Once things had settled down, I recommenced with OCTEC's parents' service on the NSW Central Coast. I told Nahria I was really keen to do some study and gain qualifications. I knew qualifications were the key to getting a

better job, and earning enough money to properly support my family. Nahria and I discussed what courses would best suit me and my goals, and she helped me enrol into a Certificate III in Community Services with TAFE.

OCTEC paid for my course, NDIS and police checks. Nahria linked me with a financial counsellor at the local Neighbourhood Centre to help me get my finances in order.

Thanks to the support from Nahria and OCTEC, I applied for and won a casual

position as a Mental Health Worker with a major not-for-profit provider. Once my youngest starts school, I plan to transfer from a casual to a permanent position.

I would like to thank Nahria from OCTEC for all her encouragement, motivation and ongoing support. She was always available to assist, and she was so caring and supportive.



Thankful Beyond Words

Caitlin

I remember when I first started with OCTEC in Tamworth, and I met with Consultant Beth. At OCTEC, well, it wasn't like being in some 'job program'. Beth and I spoke about my life.

I told her how I'd started university but had to leave because of an unplanned pregnancy. My infant daughter had some serious health issues, which required surgery. I was struggling with anxiety, depression and a lack of self-confidence. I told Beth I wanted to return to study and find a job, but I had so much on my plate.

Beth and I discussed career paths. OCTEC paid for a First Aid certificate and I enrolled in a Certificate III in Community Services.

When I completed the Cert III, Beth encouraged me to enrol into the Cert IV course, which I have

almost completed. To improve my confidence and assist me manage my own mental health, Beth suggested I complete life coaching sessions, and these were a great help.

With my confidence growing, and with a range of new skills and qualifications, Beth helped me to secure part time work as a Disability Support Worker. She gave me job interview coaching to further improve my competitiveness in the open job market. I'm now working as a casual with a local family support service.

Throughout my time with OCTEC, Beth has been nothing but reassuring, understanding and helpful. I have been working as a Disability Support Worker for almost three years and my mental and emotional health have greatly improved. To Beth, I am thankful beyond words!





OCTEC LIMITED

Phone: 1800 258 182

Web: <https://parentsnext.org.au/>

FB: facebook.com/octecaustralia/

Email: parentsnext@octec.org.au