

# Caring team shine again



## National Education Opportunities Network

The University's We Care team has gained its second national accolade in the space of a week – and later this year will be recognised in Westminster.

Last week the We Care Team were highlighted as an example of excellent practice in a briefing from the [Office for Students](#), and this week they have been named as a national finalist for the NEON Widening Access Initiative awards 2020.

The NEON Awards celebrate success in widening access to higher education work. In particular they recognise the students who have progressed to HE from widening access backgrounds, and how they made this journey.

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The We Care team's submission highlighted their work with estranged students, that is students who have no parental home to go to and no parental contact to rely on, talk to or ask for emotional or financial support. The work of the team has become particularly challenging – and essential - during the current Covid-19 crisis.

They are currently supporting 128 care experienced and estranged students.

The team's submission highlighted three of our inspirational young people - Alex Hoey, who is studying BA (Hons) Media Production, Tanika Williams, BA (Hons) Events Management, and Stephen Creighton, who is studying BA (Hons) Physical Education and Youth Sport. You can read their stories below.

Wendy Price, We Care Team Manager, says: "The University is renowned for its supportive and nurturing approach to students, ensuring that everyone regardless of their background has the opportunity to achieve their full potential."

**The We Care team**

Wendy continued: "I am delighted that we have been shortlisted for a prestigious NEON Award. The support provided by the We Care Team is directly linked to our strategic objective to widening access to higher education.

"Having a dedicated team to support care experienced and estranged students enables us to provide personalised support to each individual student, from the point of initial enquiry to graduation, and beyond. We engage directly with our students to ensure that our support is responsive, fit for purpose and valued.

"Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic meant we needed to review the support we offer to students. We called each individual student to check in and agree an individual support plan. This has included weekly check ins by phone and video calls, storage of belongings, sending birthday cards and food vouchers – and even collecting and delivering prescriptions!

"We know the difference, and reassurance, that this support can provide, meaning that students are able to focus on their studies and achieve the best possible academic outcome."

**The 2020 NEON Awards is planned to take place at the Palace of Westminster in October.**

**Alex Hoey, BA (Hons) Media Production**

**Alex Hoey lost his mother to cancer last year, and is now estranged from his father. He runs a small business making costumes for cosplay enthusiasts and is looking forward to his future media career.**

"I came to University of Sunderland because I had seen the facilities on an open day. I really liked what I saw and wanted to continue studying media at a higher level. Media is my passion. I see it an art form, and a voice that I can use to express myself.

"The best advice I can give to anyone unsure about coming to university is to not feel trapped. Go to the open days, go and check out loads of options and subjects. If you start a course and don't like it, you can always switch. No one will make you study something you dislike for three years. The same goes for accommodation, if you can't handle it and want to live at home, that's okay!

"At the moment I have to just take every obstacle as it comes and live in the moment. I have no clue where the next few years will take me, but I would like a career in the media, and would also like to continue with my business on the side.

"I have amazing friends who are always wanting to hang out, but also respect that sometimes I need time to myself. My friends unwavering support along with the support of the University have been central to me making it through the last year, so I am extremely grateful and lucky.

"I used to visit my mam when she was ill, and I know she was proud of me coming to the University."

**Tanika Williams, BA (Hons) Events Management,**

**Starting university can be difficult for anyone, but for Tanika, who had lost both her mum and dad within two years of each other, it must have been a particularly difficult experience – but she is absolutely determined to make the most of the opportunities her life can offer.**

"I have family in Sunderland, and moved here from Greater Manchester in 2016 after losing my dad. Two years before that I lost my mam. Me and my dad were joined at the hip, and losing him was one of the hardest times of my life. I decided to come to Sunderland as I wanted to expand my available possibilities for the future and to give myself a better chance at a good career.

"I am the first person from my family to actually go to university so it was hard getting advice of whether or not to go for it to begin with. So I made the decision for myself to come to university. I'm learning new things every day. It's a real pleasure to be a part of the University."

Tanika says she would not hesitate to advise any young person worried about going to university to just to go for it.

"Don't hold back. There is no better feeling than knowing you're doing something good for your future, and you will make amazing friends along the way. Even though some of the worst things can happen, there's always the chance to move on and improve yourself. The University of Sunderland has really helped me realise that."

**Stephen Creighton, BA (Hons) Physical Education and Youth Sport.**

**After losing his mother to cancer and becoming estranged from his father, Stephen has had what he describes as a “topsy turvy” few years, and now hopes to build a solid foundation for his future.**

"My mother died of lung cancer in 2013, and I became estranged from my father in the summer of 2017. Since then I have lived in a combination of a hostel, foster care and supported accommodation.

"For me the best thing about coming to the University of Sunderland is meeting so many incredible people on my course. They are a great group of people, and have made my time here even better than I expected.

"The course was a good fit for me, but one of the main reasons I chose to study at the University of Sunderland is because of the support that was offered by the We Care Team."

Stephen admits it has not all been smooth going in his first year at University, but it has been worth every minute.

"Settling in was tough for me. I found the environment of university hard because of my past, and being in a new place brought some challenges. I was unsure about whether to go to university or not, but it turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made."