

Student 'conquers mountain' with chaplain

WHEN she noticed a student at South Lake Primary School was having difficulty getting to school each morning, YouthCARE chaplain Toni-Lee Bellaart decided to make it her mission to help.

Year 5 student Shanae's anxiety was so bad that it was making her late to class most days.

Even when Shanae made it to school, she found it extremely difficult to go to class.

Mrs Bellaart teamed up with Shanae's mum Leah Hendy, Principal Leigh Liley and Deputy Susan Kirkham to find a solution.

"The Principal and I sat down with Shanae and we talked about deep breathing exercises," Mrs Bellaart said.

The chaplain then had a one-on-one session with Shanae and tried different strategies to ease the anxiety.

"I encouraged her and told her she had already conquered a huge milestone by coming to school," she said.

"I used the analogy of when people climb mountains, they don't automatically go straight to the top - they take one step at a time and conquer little mountains along the way.

"I described getting her uniform on as climbing part of a mountain; walking to school, walking through the gates etc.

"I encouraged her by saying: 'Look at all the mountains you have already climbed'.

"It seemed to be helping, so I continued with this by getting her to write down a list of the next 'steps' or 'mountains'.

"This included putting on her bag, walking to the library, getting a drink of water, walking to the classroom door, sitting down at her desk and remembering to take deep breaths."

Toni-Lee then proceeded to work through the steps with Shanae, with the pair eventually making it to the classroom.

The teacher gave Shanae a 'Daily Goal Setting Book' and didn't embarrass her for being late.

"I stayed with Shanae while she completed her task of setting a goal," Mrs Bellaart said.

"She told me that her goal was to be in class each day 8.30am.

“I told her that it was a great goal to set.”

The next day, Shanae made it to class early and was able to socialise with the other students.

“I told Shanae that she had conquered a massive mountain this morning and she said she was really proud of herself,” Mrs Bellaart said.

“I went straight to the office and started dancing with the deputy.

“It was such a wonderful achievement for this student to have no tears and be in class by 8:30am after only one day.”

Since then, Shanae has been at school every day (excluding a sick day) with little to no tears, achieving her goal and conquering her mountains.

Ms Hendy said she was grateful to the school for all the help.

“Having the support of our chaplain has been fantastic,” she said.

“Toni-Lee has helped Shanae face challenges with her anxiety and set goals to help her calmly get to class.

“She has been extremely patient, understanding and supportive with both Shanae and myself which has helped immensely in at times a very stressful situation.”

Principal Liley said having a chaplain in her school was invaluable.

“At South Lake Primary, Toni-Lee deals with a wide range of issues, but most frequently social relationship issues such as peer relationships, loneliness and bullying,” she said.

“Toni-Lee's flexible schedule enables her to work with students in a crisis (parent and teacher referrals).

“Classroom teachers state that there are times when a student comes to school in an anxious state, whilst they have teaching duties to perform, Toni-Lee provides support for students and families in crisis.

“Her insights into the background of the students gives us all a better understanding of the needs and situations from which they came.”

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