

## **The Story of Lisa**

Melbourne Australia

### **Background**

Lisa is the daughter of Hmong refugees from Laos who had arrived in Australia a couple of years before her birth. Her parents had little formal education and for much of her childhood her father was unemployed while her mother looked after the seven children. The family was on a low income throughout her childhood and school fees were a problem. At 6, her father described her as healthy, a smart, quiet child who was having no problems with school and got on very well with others.

At 11, she enjoyed school though she was anxious about going into secondary school. She wanted to be a doctor. At 14, she had left home and school early in Year 9 to live with her boyfriend's family interstate.

She thought she might go to school there but needed money to pay for her keep.

### **December 2005 (age 15)**

At 15 Lisa was living interstate with her boyfriend and his family and was working part-time in a fast food shop which she didn't like.

### **Leaving school**

I left school when I moved up here. I wanted to go to school, but then I had this other decision in my head like if I go to school I don't have enough money for myself up here, so I decided to work instead. My parents weren't happy at first, but then, I don't know now.

School was good. I got on well with all of the teachers mostly. Sometimes I just felt like staying home, sometimes I felt like going to school. Sometimes if I didn't want to attend an activity at school like I just didn't go. Since I went off school I can't remember anything that I learned now.

I'm working right now at Red Rooster. I've been working three months and a half now, about four hours and a half a day, three days a week. I don't like the rude customers. I get \$8 an hour. I want to work in a clothes shop, but it's really hard to

find a job. For the future, I'm just hoping to find a better job. If I have a family that might stop me.

December 2006 (age 16)

Early in 2006 Lisa started school again interstate for a few months. She then returned home to Melbourne with her boyfriend to live with her father. She tried Year 10 at a new school for a couple of months (July to September) but found it too difficult. By the end of the year, aged 16, she was looking for full-time work.

### **June 2007 (age 17)**

Six months later she said she had been unsuccessful in getting a job. Her Job Network provider was trying to help her get into a 6-month tourism course at TAFE so she would have some training, but she could not afford the \$900 fee. She was living with her boyfriend at her cousins' house but they wanted to move.

I've been looking for a job. It's a struggle because of not much experience and qualifications so I want to do a course but couldn't afford it. I'd

send my résumé to places but they don't call back and I call some but they already have someone for the job. I look in the newspaper. Job Network is very good, they try and help me find jobs.

I don't know what's going to happen in the future. I might be moving, trying to get a place in the high-rise, me and my boyfriend. We were living with my parents for a year and we moved to my Stories of early school leaving 32 cousins'. Now I really want to move to Fitzroy. There are more opportunities for jobs than where I

am now. My boyfriend's got an apprenticeship, a mechanic.

### **November 2007 (age 17)**

Now aged 17, Lisa was due to have a baby in May. In this interview she gave details of her Hmong wedding in 2005 when she was aged nearly 15 and her boyfriend, from the same clan as her father, was nearly 17. She said it is usual for Hmong girls to marry at 15. She referred to her 'boyfriend' or 'fiancé' to others, but to her 'husband' among the Hmong community. She rather regretted marrying so early, and thought an older age would be better, maybe 18. Her younger sister wants to wait longer than 15 because she has seen what a struggle it is for her. Her parents gave her some money for the future but that was spent on her husband's car. They would have an Australian marriage when she was 18. Her main problem now was finding somewhere to live, because for strong cultural reasons she couldn't live with her own relatives when she had her baby. She and her fiancé hoped to move into public housing in inner Melbourne.

### **Since leaving school**

Not much happened. I left school, I'm looking for work, that's about it. Yeah, that's about it. I don't know what else. The only thing I thought about was getting a job, that's all.

Leaving school, moving interstate, work and return to school

I became engaged to my boyfriend which is my aunt's cousin. I was nearly 15. Is that illegal? First I looked for a job and I worked for three months so I could get a bit of money. I was referred by one of my friends up there. They just pretty much took me in without my résumé. Up there I didn't pay anything. We were living with his parents and we didn't have to pay anything.

After three months of working I went to school, Year 11. It wasn't difficult, the school work up there, mainly nearly the same thing as Year 9 down here, but it was a bit different in some ways. I think it was for about five or six months and then we came back to Melbourne.

I was kind of having a difficulty with his mum, we didn't really get along, so my parents said I could move back down here to live with them and he came back down with me.

Second return to school

In Melbourne I went back to school in Year 10. It was quite hard compared to Year 11 up there. I didn't really do much in Year 9, then I went up there to Year 11 and I didn't do much there, then I came back to Year 10. Basically what everybody learned you had to catch up and you don't really know much. It was difficult. I didn't tell them, but I think they did know that I was struggling. It's just mainly the work, just understanding.

I left (which my father told me not to, but I was struggling for a while) and I thought I'd get a job.

### **Work experience**

When I came down, I think it was in January this year, I went to have work experience at my workplace for one month. A takeaway food place.

They just gave me training for one month. They just needed a few people ... It was

\$7 an hour. It was bit hot. There was a lot of cooking. Working with my mum, it was good, but it was a bit scary. She was always nagging me. If something that I did wasn't as good as the managers thought, they wouldn't say to me but they

would go to my mum, 'Oh tell your daughter to do this'. They wouldn't tell me. So mum would always come nag me. I'll never ever work with my mum again.

### **Looking for work**

I just looked for work and I struggled to find a job in Melbourne because I don't have much experience. I have nothing that qualified me for a job and stuff like that. I looked for mainly retailing. It's hard cos most of them needed people with qualifications or experience in retailing which I don't have, only in food. I want to work in a shop that sells stuff like products or clothing or something like that. It's turned out I've been unsuccessful. I've been applying for Seven Eleven three times and they took me for an interview three times and I got the same letter back. Three times they called me for an interview, but then I didn't get the job. I've tried like clothes shops and Broadmeadows shopping centre and Priceline and I've been trying in Preston as well.

Employers want you to be confident – which I'm not really, I'm not that talkative – and better experience, which I don't have. I just kept looking for a job. I was looking for a job that has a traineeship as well, so I can get a certificate while doing the job as well. I looked through the Job Network and the internet. I didn't actually go on any course because the fees and all that were too expensive. So I'm looking for a job with a traineeship. We've been applying for administration or office traineeships. Me and my Job Network [worker], she's been helping me apply. School again? No I don't think so. It's still the same. I think that I'll still struggle if I go back to school. Especially when I left in Year 9 and Year 11 and Year 10. My sister's doing Year 11. I'd be so upset going back to Year 10.

### **Assistance**

My family, they're a bit busy. I don't have friends. I just rely on my brothers. My brother, he's 20, he's doing TAFE in Victoria University, he hasn't got a job yet. My dad's working, paying off the mortgage. My fiancé's got a mechanical apprenticeship. He did want me to get a job but now I'm pregnant I don't know, especially if we're going to move out on our own, and going to struggle a little bit. He's doing second year apprentice. He's being paid gross \$484 a week. I get a fortnight \$190 from Centrelink (Youth Allowance).

Centrelink, they pay me. It just depends on staff. Some are quite easy and over and done with. Some are really difficult, they ask you a lot of questions and it's a bit more difficult to get paid. And they ask you to bring more statements. Now I'm with JPET, I'm looking for housing, I'm filling in the form but I'm not looking for a job. It's the same as if you're looking for a job except that it doesn't have the four columns if you're looking for a job. It just asks if your address or anything has changed or anything needs to be updated. It's once a month now. I have to have the Activity Agreement with JPET and not with Centrelink looking for a job. It's better, because I don't have to look for a job to put in there. I don't think there's a point if I just have to put down jobs. I was looking for a job before, like putting them down on my paper as well.

I'd just put in my normal Job Network job searching job on the computer. I'd find the jobs on the computer at Job Network and some would be on paper that I would phone and call them and ask them. I did that for three months. Job Network, they just help me look for a job, update my résumé, like helping with letters, sending letters, finding jobs. JPET, she's been helping me look for a job but then after I found that I was pregnant she is helping me look for housing as well. She's been referring me to this group called Crossroads, they've been getting support letters so we can get a place. She's been looking out for properties for us and she's been calling up these services ... I think JPET there's not much they can offer me, but she can help me with getting little things like a car seat and things.

### **Looking for somewhere to live**

I want to move to the flats [high-rise public housing]. It will be a very long wait. I went to see them before and I needed a medical certificate updated so I updated that and they said when I updated it to give them a call and find out how long the wait will be. It's to say that I'm pregnant, confirming that. I gave them my medical certificate. She already sent me last month but they hadn't updated on the computer or anything. The lady told me to call back when I get the letter.

We can't live with my aunty ... I don't know, it's something spiritual, you are not allowed to stay in the house, unless it's your house or your boyfriend's house or his parents. I have to move out like before the birth. If my boyfriend had relatives down here we'd be able to live with them, but he doesn't have any relatives here and the relatives that we have are my parents' relatives. Now that I'm pregnant and having a baby, in our culture I'm already in his clan now. I can't live with my parents. I can't go back to their house for like one month ... My mum, she goes, 'If you were a boy you'd be able to come here, but you're a girl, you're going to have kids, you can't'. Then she goes that she loves me a lot but I can't go there.

### **Pregnancy**

I went to see the doctor last month and the baby is all fine and my blood and everything is all fine. [Lisa had not expected to get pregnant and would have chosen to wait till she was 18.]

Because I went to see the doctor before that and they go I'm not able to get pregnant at all. I went and had my ovaries checked and I had confirmed that I had ovary disease and they were pretty sure I can't get pregnant. I went and got an ultrasound done on my ovaries as well. I was sad that I could not get pregnant ever in my whole lifetime ... After two months, no medication, nothing, then I got pregnant.

### **Money**

I've had a struggle with finances. There were problems with my father and I had to move out. We're living with my aunty. My boyfriend's working but I'm not and it's getting a little bit difficult. We pay for half all the bills and we buy food as well. We are just struggling a bit financially now. It's just overcrowded and the finances. Six people and it's only got small rooms. We've got to try and get another place – like private rental, but we're struggling with finances because it's too expensive. We're just waiting on public housing, that's going to be a long wait.

Mainly it's just bills, paying for the car insurance, I mean the rego, and paying for his school fees next year, cos he's doing TAFE as part of his apprenticeship, that's one of the things we have to start saving for. Trying to pay the bills, because this month bills come in, and food as well, and there's not much we can buy because he gets \$400 per week and with petrol and everything it's all gone in one week.

I think my father is struggling with money to pay the mortgage, my brother's not working at all, he's doing Centrelink and he has a baby as well because his girlfriend is living with him. And my father's got three other kids with him, my brother older than me, and two other younger [ones].

### **The future**

When she was 11 Lisa had wanted to be a doctor. Did I? I don't know, I probably never got there. I haven't got there at all. It was just a dream.

I'll look after the baby for a few months or maybe after one year until I can get some child-care; if I can get that I'll look for a job. I'll see what happens after I give birth. It depends on where we live. It depends if we get a private rental or public housing. If we get private rental probably in the northern area where I have my grandmother as well and if she's able to look after the child, then after I'll get a job, but if she is not able I will stay home.

We have nothing for our future, when we move out we're going to be struggling to save up to buy food and stuff like that, bedding and a bed and especially the baby coming up and there's nothing prepared for that as well and no money for that as well.

### **Advice for services to help young people**

I don't know. Just referrals, if they can't help you, to some other place that can help you. Maybe help through a school, youth centres, maybe at Centrelink and Job Network.

These stories are collected by Janet Taylor [www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)