**Student profile: Tara Muscatello**

BSSC Year 11 student, Tara Muscatello, has some solid advice for her 12 year-old self.

“Try not to let bullies see that they are getting to you. Keep pushing on. Keep doing what brings you joy.”

For Tara, it was the power of music to sustain—even heal—that helped her cope as she struggled with the horrible experience of being bullied between Grade 4 and 6.

“Music kept me sane through that terrible time,” she insists.

In Grade 6 Tara moved to a small rural primary school where she discovered a very happy ending to her primary years. She has gone on to enjoy school, and life in general, but the importance of music has never left her.

Asked if there was a particular piece that meant a lot she names ‘Valerie’ by Amy Winehouse which was—and still is—a really important song for her.

As she finished up Grade 6 at Koorlong Primary, Tara was given her first taste of performing solo—invited to sing at the end-of-year concert.

She was completely hooked by the experience.

“I knew from then on I had to have music as a major part of my life.”

Tara’s family moved to Bendigo at the end of that year, and a couple of weeks after arriving, went out for a meal at a local pub. The family was really enjoying the two musicians providing the live music.

“We all love music and were all singing along with these two guys who were the entertainers,” Tara says. “Then, during a break in their set, they came over and asked which of us was the singer.

“Mum and Dad dropped me right in it and the next thing I knew I was up there singing ‘Valerie’. Everyone rocked along and I got a big applause at the end. Those two guys are now important mentors and good friends.”

In Year 7 at Bendigo South East College, Tara joined the choir and was even given a few solos in her first year. The following year BSE established its Academy of Creative Arts (ACA) and Tara auditioned successfully for the program. It meant three sessions a week with a vocal coach and the opportunity to work with and learn from guest experts.

The academy also gave Tara some outstanding opportunities.

“A group from the ACA sang in the foyer as people were arriving for both the Jimmy Barnes show at Ulumbarra and Marina Pryor and David Hobson at The Capital,” she says. “It was a fantastic experience.”

But it was when the ACA held their annual showcase and Tara, still only a Year 8 student, was given a solo that her love of performing—despite being wracked with nerves before each event—was completely cemented.

“Sport I enjoy,” she says, “but music fulfils me.”

Over the next two years Tara continued to expand her competence and experience as a singer and performer. She got into rap, began learning guitar, and was given the critical feedback she needed. During her time at BSE, one of her goals was to be asked to perform at the all-school assembly held at the start of each year.

“In Year 10 I got that solo,” she says, “which was so cool!”

Despite this, the real highlight of Year 10 was being asked to speak (and sing) during Youth Day at the Artlands Festival which was held at the Ulumbarra Theatre.

“I had to speak about how the arts had impacted my life”, Tara explains. “I decided to tell everyone the very personal story of how music made such a difference when I was being bullied. It was not easy, but I did it. I practiced my speech heaps so that I wouldn’t cry.

“I was shocked when I received a standing ovation,” Tara recalls. “And then two women approached me at the end of the session. One said she wanted to apologise on behalf of all the good people of Mildura for my horrendous experience of bullying. The second person was crying and explained that her daughter was in the midst of dealing with a bully. ‘You’ve given me hope,’ she said.”

“This was an incredible experience and really affirmed the importance of honesty and openness when you are given such a platform.”

The following year Tara arrived at BSSC with a great group of friends, some really important experiences under her belt and clarity about her pathway into the future.

 “BSSC has been amazing for me,” she says. “The best thing has been the supportiveness of the teachers—not just my music teachers but all of them. I feel very connected.”

At BSSC, Tara is in classes with students who are as passionate about music as she is and teachers who are interested in her music as well as how she is going in their subject.

“All my teachers usually ask me how I went after a performance,” she says. “My English teacher, Angie Pollock, came along to see me perform at the Bendigo Easter Festival’s ‘Battle of the Voice’.”

Asked for a study tip, Tara explains that she knows her learning style really well.

“I’m a visual learner,” she says, “so I find it helpful to draw big revision sheets and use all different colours to highlight what is really important.”

The future is looking very musical with Tara hoping to enrol in a Bachelor of Music Performance at the Australian Institute of Music once she completes VCE.

“I need good marks in English,” she says, “but it is essentially an audition process that will happen next year. I will start talking about this process with the Institute soon.”

Meanwhile, the word is getting out—helped by social media—that Tara can add something special to an event or business.

Weddings and other private functions, Sutton Grange Winery, Yard Bird and Brady’s Tavern are just some of the settings where Tara combines delighting her audiences, building her experience and having a part-time job.

“I also volunteer by singing at charity events such as the Suicide Prevention Awareness Network where I performed earlier this year,” she says.

Tara’s parents are big supporters.

“Not only do they drive me to functions, but Dad is my roadie and they are also my sound-engineers!”

Despite the intensity of her focus on music, Tara is not completely absorbed by her performing opportunities. She believes it’s very important to be aware of what’s going on in the world and keep up with global issues.

“I find the violence in the world extremely disturbing—especially school shootings in the US,” she points out. “These are kids my age. I can’t imagine going to school and not being sure I was safe there.”

She also names poverty, inequality, malnutrition—including obesity—and the shocking lack of services available to the very poor, as issues needing urgent attention.

“At the same time I’m really inspired by the way people cope,” Tara says. “I think when you are having a bad day it’s good to remember that others are doing it so much tougher.”

“I’d like to use my art for more than self-promotion. If I have the platform to address some of these issues, I hope to take the opportunity.”