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Top spot for a top mum

SPENDING most of her teenage years in Italy proved a test of Alessandra Daley's strength and determination.

She lived in Australia from the age of two then moved back to her native Italy as a 13-year-old with her parents and two younger brothers to be close to a sick grandmother.

At that time, even in her wildest dreams, she could not have imagined she would one day return to South Australia and become Flinders Ports' human resources and management systems manager . . . and be named South Australia's 2003 Telstra Young Business Woman of the Year.

The company manages all the SA commercial ports and vessels in Australian ports.

Its main role is to provide all services to vessels while they are in the port. Talking of her childhood, Ms Daley says: ``My parents thought they would go back to Italy and see what it was like.

``But when they went back, there things really hadn't changed and the small town mentality remained."

For Ms Daley, high school in the town of Sestu, in Cagliari, southern Italy, was the greatest test of all.

One incident, in particular, left an indelible impression on her. It also hinted at what is one of her greatest strengths in her present job - her willingness to break down barriers and overcome obstacles.

``It was very hard moving back and we weren't lucky in the town where we lived," she says. ``We didn't have some of the things we have for migrants in Australia.

``Here, you get to learn English before you go to school but over there I was at school on the first day and I had to learn how to communicate."

On day one at school, the teacher asked her to write Italian verbs on the blackboard. ``I didn't know what to write," she says. ``My teacher made me write on the blackboard: `In Australia children don't study, in Australia children are ignorant'. I was devastated because I had always been a top student and it took me two months to recover. But I was so determined to beat this teacher I stayed up every night learning Italian so I would pass the school year."

Her hard work paid off and she passed with flying colours.

Now fluent in Italian and English, Ms Daley later learnt Spanish and French in her work as a tour guide.

She also began to think about her career path.

``I always wanted to be an interpreter because I had learned the four languages and wanted to do something with them," she says.

But, at 18, Ms Daley's parents, Enrico and Pina Manca, decided it was time to return to Australia.

``Life was a lot harder in Italy," she says.

``My brother has cerebral palsy and that was a big impetus for the decision to come back because the services just weren't there.

``My parents also questioned what sort of future we would have there.

``People with degrees were sweeping the streets and I never would have had the opportunities there that I have had here."

Back in Adelaide, Ms Daley accepted a six-month traineeship in the Landcare Environment Action Program. She worked with Mitcham Council on cultural and heritage issues.

Then she ``fell" into a government traineeship, working as a human resources assistant in the marine and harbours department.

``I saw it as a good way to get skills and experience," she says.

``It was important because so many young people are told in interviews 'but you don't have any experience'.

``(So) I put my head down and learned."

When the opportunity arose to move up the ranks to become a personal assistant, Ms Daley applied for the job and got it. It was a career turning point.

``The division manager at the time, who is still my boss today gave me the opportunity," she says. ``It was then I realised I didn't want a straight data-entry job."

Encouragement a key

The key for Ms Daley was, and still is, encouragement.

``If I had an idea, I was always encouraged to go for it," she says.

``I was allowed to develop the job and a lot of managers don't allow for that."

Her proactive attitude has also helped her rise through the ranks in the typically male-dominated maritime industry.

For Ms Daley - now Flinders Ports' human resources and management systems manager - encouraging and developing her staff helps keep the day-to-day operations of her company running smoothly.

``It is a full circle," she says. ``If you give to your co-workers, they give back and you end up getting the rewards of being part of a team."

Her business life has not always been easy.

``I have had some negative experiences and I can see why some women have difficulties," she says.

``Initially, I suffered a bit from the I-have-to-prove-myself syndrome. ``But I have established a good rapport with the staff."

In September, her hard work was rewarded when she was named SA 2003 Telstra Young Business Woman of the Year. ``It was a huge buzz in the company and everyone was so supportive," she says.

Some people expressed surprise that Ms Daley, who was heavily pregnant with her first child, could win the award. ``Some people said they found it surprising that they gave the award to someone who was pregnant," she says. ``I was surprised that people were still saying things like that."

Now the proud mother of baby Michael - born on Christmas Day - Ms Daley is planning to ease herself back into work. ``There are a lot of flexible arrangements available to me which is great," she says.

As for those who are wondering what to do with their careers, she offers some advice. ``I would definitely recommend a traineeship," she says. ``I can't stress the enormous benefit of them. I had no skills and they taught me so much."