

You may know me as 'Miss Williams', but like all of your teachers, we have our own story to tell. Out of school, I'm Lizzie Williams, a Professional Cyclist riding for Orica AIS. I've been asked today to share my story to you all, and in doing so I hope to inspire you to follow your dreams without fear or judgment.

Let me rewind about 20 years to when I first set foot into the gym at Northcote High School, but firstly, some background info.

I come from a large family, the youngest and only girl of 7 children. You can imagine the competitive, physical and boisterous environment I grew up in. I spent my primary school years in Shepparton in country Victoria. My childhood was spent mainly outdoors playing every type of sport you could imagine. I was 12 when we moved back to Melbourne and my two brothers and I were enrolled in Northcote High School.

At first NHS was a bit of a culture shock. Coming from a country town we hadn't really been exposed to a broad range of nationalities and cultures.

During the late 90's the majority of the students from NHS travelled from as far as Epping to school. My year 7 form had kids from Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Africa, Italy and China. At lunchtimes students would run their own soccer competitions, Wogs Vs Skips. This was always hotly contested, sometimes ending in a fist fight or brawl of some description.

I can say there was never a dull moment at recess and lunchtimes for me. Plenty of choice for sport to take part in on the expansive muddy grounds. Some of my fondest memories were lunchtime sport competitions and inter school sport days run by yours truly, Mr Price.

Mr Price who was more commonly referred to as 'pricey', was my introduction to PE/Sport at school. To this day, pricey is still going strong. He is somewhat of an icon at NHS. His familiar relaxed, friendly and slow speaking persona left an imprint in my early years at high school. His subtle encouragement and inclusiveness in PE and Sport classes provided me with a positive and memorable experience.

From a very young age I played footy with my brothers and neighbors. When an opportunity arose for me to play in an all female competition at school I jumped at the chance.

The interschool Competition was open to all year 7-10 girls. I was determined to make the team even as a junior, so without any hesitation I went hell for leather in the try-outs and sailed through. Years of hanging out with boys finally reaped its benefits. There's something special about representing your school, I always felt incredibly proud representing Nhs.

When a group of people can come together as one, all striving for the same goal, it's something I always enjoy. It never really mattered if we won or lost, the camaraderie felt within the group was the main experience I was chasing. Needless to say, we didn't win that competition but I did make some valuable friendships whom I'm mates with to this day.

And It's always handy to have a few friends some years older than you at school, to watch out for you and to also to be a positive role model. Just make sure they're influencing you in good ways, not bad!

By Year 9 I had discovered a new passion, and that was for Cycling.

Football had taken the back seat as I was getting too old to compete against the boys. Throughout my years at Northcote, any opportunity I got to represent the school/ get out of class, I grabbed. I got wind that the Victorian School Cycling Championships were being held nearby in Bundoora that year, so I asked Pricey If he would take me.

Back then, no one from my school that I knew of was into cycling. To take one student to a competition was a big ask, but like I mentioned earlier, Pricey was a huge part in encouraging and supporting my sporting pursuits. I still remember Pricey taking me to that sporting meet, I had no idea how I would fare against the rest of the girls but he just told me to have some fun and do my best in his slow, relaxing monotone voice. How could I have not be relaxed by this!

I managed to cream my opponents in the sprint and take home the Gold for Northcote High. Both Pricey and I were chuffed, I think he may even have bought me an icy pole on the way back to school.

That day was a catalyst in propelling my cycling to a new level. It gave me confidence and drive to aspire for bigger goals and I began to take cycling quite seriously from then on.

I joined Brunswick Cycling Club and graduated through the weekly Cycling Clinic run at Brunswick Velodrome during the Summer and then onto National Track and Road Junior Championships, culminating in competing at the Sydney Junior Olympics in the year 2000.

On entering senior ranks at the age of 19, I won the Australian Criterium Championship in 2003, a 1hr long race around a short street circuit. This brought on a lot of attention and not long after I was riding for the VIS and invited to travel overseas for a 3 month racing block with the Australian Women's Road team.

I was at the crossroads at this stage in my cycling career, training full-time and also studying a Bachelor of Applied Science. It was becoming quite challenging to juggle both. After much consideration I decided to hang up the bike and finish my studies.

For the next few years I worked as a teacher and ended up back at Nhs running the camps down at Boho in the Strathbogie Ranges. I never lost the desire to participate in competitive sport and physical activity. I added to my qualifications, became a personal trainer and triathlete coach as well as playing AFL with The Darebin Falcons FC and Melbourne University and then representing Victoria at the National Women's Football Championships in 2006.

All through my 20's I still had those unanswered questions about my cycling career;

- Could I have made it as a professional cyclist?
- What would my life look like now if I had decided to choose the other path I gave up all those years ago?

What I can share with you all today is this, the fear of failure held me back from finding out the answer to my questions for many years.

However I decided late in 2013 at the age of 30 to enter the National Criterium Championships in Ballarat in January 2014. I finished 4th

Within 5 months I was racing in America progressing to riding in Europe for the national team and representing Australia at the World Road Championships in Spain.

Finally my questions were being answered.

This is my 3rd year as a professional cyclist and it certainly hasn't been the easy path to take. So much goes into being a professional athlete and achieving success. It isn't entirely about the training and the will to win but also living away from home for much of the year, the ability to adapt to different cultures, languages and environments and including coping with the constant travel and tension that comes with being around the same group of people.

However living in Italy for the past 2 years has been an incredible life experience for me, but there have been many times of loneliness and hardship that even a gelato or Pizza couldn't fill.

*Show Sufferfest clip- one of my first spring classic races in Belgium

Nothing comes easy, if you want something bad enough, you will get it, but don't wait for it to come to you, You have to get up, get going and go after it. I always had a dream and vision of what I wanted to achieve in sport and through the right support from many people, including that very first success with the assistance of Mr Price I have been able to fulfill some of my dreams. But I'm not finished yet!