

THE SWITCH

From real estate to youth work

When Tim Cutcliffe left school, his career choice seemed obvious. "I went into real estate," he says. "It was the family business, which seemed a natural progression. I started at the bottom, working on weekends in reception, then moved into sales. When I finished, eight years later, I was managing one of the offices."

Cutcliffe soon learnt the real estate industry operates 24/7.

"Your phone is always ringing," he says. "My day started with a lot of phone contact with potential buyers and sellers; I'd be trying to get the two to meet.

"Good communication is key. You're employed by the seller, so you're working for them [but you also need to] manage their expectations."

Eventually, Cutcliffe started rethinking his career. After hearing the founder of Youth off the Streets (YOTS) speak about working with young people, he volunteered on the not-for-profit organisation's mentoring program.

"You get matched with a young person going through a struggle, to be a bit of a role model for them," he says. The person he mentored had a breakdown in family relationships and had become homeless. "We'd go to movies or have a coffee. He is now 21 and doing really well."

Volunteering opened Cutcliffe's eyes to a career he now loves.

"I found a real passion for it," he says. "I was going to one of the refuges to visit this young person; I met the other young people there and really enjoyed it."

Cutcliffe fast-tracked a TAFE diploma of community services (12 months) and started casual work at Sydney's Don Bosco house,

a crisis refuge run by YOTS, for people aged 15 to 18 who are homeless and have drug and alcohol issues.

When he became a full-time youth worker, he started by working shifts, including overnight.

"It's [often] an intense environment," he says. "The young people are like anyone else – they enjoy hanging out with friends and playing video games but behind that are some bigger issues they're dealing with.

"[They] haven't learnt the best strategies to deal with the day to day."

Cutcliffe is now the house manager at Don Bosco.

"My job is to make sure the house is running effectively and to help support our staff," he says.

Unlike real estate, success can't be measured in numbers.

"It's about moments and experiences," Cutcliffe says.

"You don't see a young person undo 16 years of neglect and abuse in a few days. For me it's about offering a positive experience – whether it's a bed for the evening or a few months.

"You hope over time the positive experiences balance out the negative and they have enough reasons to live and engage with the community."

Despite the challenges, he's never been happier.

"When you're dealing with young people you're learning a lot about yourself at the same time," Cutcliffe says.

"In real estate, a lot of it was making money for yourself but I didn't feel I was giving much back. With YOTS, I am giving to myself but helping someone else as well."

SUE WHITE



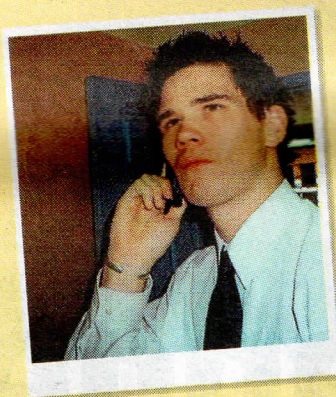
THEN

NOW

SALARY About \$80,000.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE "In real estate, I didn't feel I was 100 per cent on the right path and I think that affected other areas of my life. Now that I feel connected with what I do and passionate about it, I feel I'm more balanced in family, friends, relationships and hobbies."

HOURS About 50 hours, including every second weekend. "The hours increase if you add in all the phone conversations after you get home."



Passion play ... Tim Cutcliffe wasn't fulfilled in the family business (above) but enjoys a new calling now (main). Photo: Tamara Dean

SALARY \$55,000 to \$60,000.

"As an entry-level youth worker, it was about \$40,000 to \$45,000. [Salary] became a non-issue once I realised this was what I was passionate about."

WORK-LIFE BALANCE "I enjoy working with my team, the organisation is really supportive and I'm also doing things I like outside work."

HOURS Varies from a standard 36 hours to more. "The services are 24 hours, so I'm on call 24 hours every second week."

MISS "It was a family business, so I do miss working with my dad a bit."

CHALLENGES "Being a manager of the staff who work directly with the young people, I have to make sure they're not taking it home with them [and] am constantly keeping staff engaged in the successes – they're not always tangible."

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